MARGO RYERKERK

THE BLUEBEARD CURSE

CURSED FAIRY TALE

BOOK 2

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About the Author

Also by Margo Ryerkerk

1

JOLIE

Before I left the kitchen, I checked the items on the tray a final time—freshly brewed coffee with cream and sugar, a baguette fresh out of the oven with a selection of cheeses and spicy meats, and a single rose cut from the garden standing tall in the crystal vase. Satisfied with everything, I pushed the door open with my back and headed down the corridor toward the library and study room where Greg, Count of Heinberg took his daily breakfast.

"Come in," he called a second after I knocked.

"Good morning, Greg." After working for the count for several years and at his insistence that I call him by his first name, I had finally started to do so a few months earlier. I curtsied and put the tray in front of him. "Is there anything else I can get for you?" I always asked, even though I knew that the only other thing the middle-aged widower wanted was his morning newspaper, which I picked up as soon as I rose each morning and put into the library half an hour before I delivered breakfast.

"No, that is it, thank you, Jolie." Greg's deep-set eyes met mine, his permanent grief reflected in them, and my throat laced shut. I couldn't begin to imagine what it must've been like to lose his wife to tuberculosis and his brother a few years later to a violent death. I was so lucky that my family was still alive, even if I hadn't been able to see them in three years. It wasn't just the expense of the lengthy journey from Hamburg to Freiburg, but also Mother's insistence that it wasn't safe to travel past the Black Forest. It was believed that a wicked witch had made the woods her territory. Growing up, these stories were nothing more but rumors.

However, in the last few years, after Wagner's publication, "Witches amongst us" in 1848, several people in Freiburg claimed they had seen the witch, describing her as a blonde beauty who wore a crimson cloak.

I tore myself back to the present and checked the room. It didn't need straightening, so I began backing out, but Count Heinberg stopped me.

He motioned at the armchair opposite his. "Sit, Jolie."

Obediently, I did, sinking into the purple velvet, worry rising within me. I couldn't recall any mishap or inattentiveness, and yet, I wondered if this was it. If I had somehow messed up and was about to get the boot. What would I do if I lost this position? I couldn't return home. Even if I dared to attempt the long journey past the Black Forest, my parents had no means to feed another mouth. I would have to find another placement in Hamburg. Although the city was vast, I feared I wouldn't get as good of a post as I had at the Heinberg Estate. Also, I would have to start all over again. Pay my dues before anyone would let me anywhere near a piano. The idea of not being able to run my fingers over the black-and-white keys for months was pure torture.

Greg did nothing to alleviate my angst with his opening statement. "Changes are coming. It is time for me to step down from taking care of the estate."

I raised my eyebrows, confused at what this meant.

"My nephew Nolan is returning tomorrow."

I swallowed hard, snippets of stories I had overheard about the Heinbergs' history rising into my consciousness. Five years ago, a tragedy had struck them. Lord and Lady Heinberg were murdered. As if that wasn't grisly enough, there was gossip that their thirteen-year-old daughter had committed the crime. The girl was banished to Snake Island, an island for criminals, some of which were believed to possess black magic, and Greg arrived at the estate to support his eighteen-year-old nephew.

"Nolan will be in charge of the estate as he should be," Greg tore me out of my thoughts.

"He will?" My voice was faint as I tried not to panic. I wasn't exactly good with change. Routine and predictability gave me peace, and Nolan's return was the opposite of that.

Adding to my insecurity was that I had not once met him during my three-year service. Soon after his sister's arrest, he had chosen to travel and work on his merchant business, never returning home, not even for

holidays. Sure, he was probably busy, but I also suspected that he threw himself into work to avoid the estate, and who could blame him? Both of his parents had died here, and his sister had been dragged away in handcuffs before his eyes.

"I have the utmost trust in my nephew. The time has come for him to take on his birthright duties and privileges." Greg Heinberg tilted his head, giving me a thoughtful look. "You're a wonderful employee, Jolie. You always have a new bottle of wine ready before it is needed and a guest list for me as soon as I consider throwing a party. You go above and beyond your role."

Heat crept into my cheeks at his praise, and I lowered my eyes, unsure how to respond.

"I need you to promise me that you will take even better care of the young Lord Heinberg."

"Of course," I said automatically, and then his implication sunk in. "You're leaving?"

Greg Heinberg nodded. "I would like to take a break from Hamburg. Perhaps travel to Norway. I've never seen the fjords." He looked upward. "Before the heaven decides that it is time for me to leave this place."

My stomach knotted. Greg was old, but certainly not that old, right? He had many years, perhaps even decades, ahead of him.

He must've noticed the concern written on my face because he said, "It's going to be all right. Tell me, are you worried about Nolan returning? You don't believe the hearsay, do you?"

I furrowed my brows, unsure what gossip he was referring to.

"They aren't true," he continued. "Nolan had absolutely nothing to do with those girls' deaths."

Horror washed through me, and I was glad that Greg Heinberg chose this moment to add cream and sugar to his coffee, oblivious to the impact his word had on me.

Not wanting to appear ungrateful, I said, "I really enjoy working for you Lord Heinberg. I'm certain your nephew is a fine man, but will he be satisfied with my skills? They're not up to par to the international standard he's used to." I had seen the letters from France, England, and Ireland. Nolan was a well-traveled young man, and I was a simple maid, who had never been to any city besides Hamburg.

Greg Heinberg let out a rumbling laugh. “You don’t have to worry about that, Jolie. I’m certain he will be very pleased with you.” He looked me up and down, as if appraising me. “Your worth isn’t in your beauty, but it won’t hurt to have someone lovely to look at—” His gaze swiveled around the room. “—to take my nephew’s mind off his past.”

I lowered my gaze and bunched up the linen material of my blue dress, excited and terrified at the prospect that someone like Nolan might think I was pretty. Pretty girls were prone to receiving favors and getting into trouble, their beauty often bringing out envy and jealousy in others, and haughtiness in the girls themselves. Being pretty was a dangerous advantage, one I wasn’t sure I wanted or needed.

When I dared to look up again, Greg was staring at the bookshelves, as if taking in the room for the first time. He was probably reminiscing about the past. Not wanting to intrude, I rose but didn’t leave, worry burning brightly in my mind. “How long will you stay? You won’t leave immediately to travel to Norway, will you?”

Greg gave me a smile. “I’ll stay for a month, maybe a few, to help my nephew reacquaint himself with everything.”

Trying to be brave, I returned his smile and exited, then dashed down to the wine cellar that was empty this early in the day. Once I was certain nobody could hear me, I allowed the tears to roll down my cheeks. I hated myself for crying, yet there was nothing I could do about it. Because while it was right for the young count to take his place and for his uncle to retreat, it was a bitter medicine for me to swallow. I had thought that in the last three years and especially since turning eighteen last month, I had come to terms with being this far away from my family, but Greg Heinberg leaving showed me just how much I still craved to have a family. I might have left my original family, but I had found a father in steady and patient Greg. Now that he was leaving, I would have no one to watch over me and advise me.

2

DELILAH

The moon waned, and the darkness grew lighter and lighter as the first sunrays broke through the sky, lighting it up in pink and bluish hues. My fellow inmates, delinquent adolescents from stately families, slept tightly, but I hadn't been able to find any shuteye this night. It wasn't just because I had turned eighteen last night, celebrating this milestone with filthy water and a tasteless porridge in a forsaken, dank cell on Snake Island; it was also because my brother was returning to our estate in Hamburg. How dare he? How dare he continue living his life while I rotted away in here?

I gripped the magic mirror in my hand so hard, I was afraid I would break it. Since Griselda the mouse shifter had escaped the prison cell a few months earlier, she had left the magic mirror in my possession. At first, I had believed it a blessing, the mirror allowing me to watch Nolan whenever I wished to. Euphoria overcame me when I discovered that my brother at his twenty-three years of age was far away from Hamburg, often traveling in uncomfortable conditions and that just like myself, he was unattached. He didn't deserve love or happiness, not after what he had done to me. How dare he turn me into the police? How dare he tell them he had seen me above Mother and Father's dead forms—her lips blue and motionless after the last drink she had had, and blood streaming out of his chest?

I shook my head. I had been working on a plan to escape Snake Island for a while, biding my time. Now that Nolan had decided to return to Hamburg, I had to move up my timeline. I had to intervene before what the psychic had foretold would come true. A shiver overcame me as I

remembered the words she had spoken in the square as the police arrested me, Nolan watching on, doing nothing.

"Delilah, you will pay for your sins. You will die by your own blade. Nolan, your honesty and bravery will be rewarded. When you're ready to claim your title, you will find the love of your life, and she will help you mend your wounds and make you whole again."

For five years, my brother had ignored his title, traveling all over Europe and working on his merchant business. From what the magic mirror showed me, I gathered he had become quite successful, importing fine silks and other fabrics. His work ethic made me gag. Whenever I looked in the mirror, he was either closing a deal, working on one, or checking the quality of the goods he was importing. But as much as I was disgusted with him constantly doing work that was below our count title, it was nothing compared to how I felt about him claiming the Heinberg Estate. It wasn't his. After all the misery he had inflicted on me, he didn't deserve a penny of our estate, which was my birthright. I deserved the splendor and respect that awaited me when I once again became Lady Delilah Heinberg. My brother, on the other hand, deserved lifelong misery. Death, the punishment of our parents, was too good for him. He was a snitch, and snitches had to pay in long and excruciating ways.

Longingly, I twirled the mirror in my hand, wishing I had more magic than just this piece. Unfortunately, magic didn't run in my blood. My skills were in knives—stabbing and throwing, both of which I had taught myself. And I knew a thing or two about poisons. Belladonna grew everywhere in Germany, and it was child's play to add the deadly dark berries to wine or a dessert. In the last five years, however, I had no access to poisonous plants or blades, but time had given me a new weapon—my feminine body.

Ever since, Griselda the mouse shifter had escaped to Snake Island, the prison rules had become stricter. At least one guard was constantly positioned outside our cell, making it impossible to flee undetected.

Luckily for me, tonight, the nightshift had fallen to Malcolm.

I finger combed my hair, pinched my cheeks, and bit my lips to get color into them. Then I unbuttoned my dress so that my blossoming cleavage was on display, stepped toward the bar, and whistled lowly.

A few seconds later, Malcolm, a slightly overweight guard with a soft face came to the other side of the bars. I had been working him for a long time, laughing at his idiotic jokes, telling him how smart he was, and

batting my eyelashes at him whenever I saw him. Now, it was time to cash in.

"What is it, Delilah?" he asked, suspicion in his voice. Just because he wanted me didn't mean he had forgotten that I was an inmate, imprisoned on the account of two murder charges. I twirled a hair strand around my finger and replied in a low, seductive voice, "Do you know what day it is?"

"Of course. It's September the twenty-first."

"I didn't mean the date." I pouted. "It's my eighteenth birthday, and nobody has given me any presents."

"It is?" He sounded still suspicious, and I reached between my breasts, stroking them lightly as I pulled out my necklace and showed him the pendant on it, my birth date engraved in the gold.

His gaze had difficulty staying on the jewelry and not my chest, and I smiled, knowing I had him where I needed him to be.

"Did you get to do something fun on your eighteenth birthday?" The innocent question produced the reaction I had hoped—lighting his face up.

"I walked the city, and then I had a lovely meal with my friends."

I suppressed an eye roll at his confession, disgusted by what a loser Malcolm was. Of course, he strolled idly in his free time, his head empty of thoughts. "That sounds lovely. I bet you got lots of presents too." I leaned against the bar, pressing my face against the cold steel, hoping my eyes reflected the sadness I had practiced.

He nodded. "Yes, I got a few."

"I didn't get any." I paused for effect. "I don't want anything expensive, but I wish I could go outside just this once. It's been five years since I have been allowed outdoors." He bit his lip, and I pressed on before I lost him. "I just feel so connected to nature, so at ease, my heart opens up at the idea of spending a few minutes outside." I paraphrased what he had told me a few weeks earlier about why he enjoyed leisurely walks. Judging from the softening of his face, I had done a good job.

"Wait here. I'll be right back," he said and disappeared, probably making sure that he could sneak me outside.

When he returned, I glanced up at him from underneath my eyelashes, playing shy. As always, my submissiveness ignited his protective streak, and he pulled out his pocket watch. "Five minutes. That's all I can give you."

"Thank you, thank you!"

He opened the cell, closing it immediately after me, and I fell around his neck. He smelt of strawberries and cream, a sissy smell but preferable to sweat I supposed. When I pulled away, he appeared dazed, as if no one had ever hugged him before. Quickly, before he decided to handcuff me, I took his hand, hoping that would be enough for him to not restrain me.

He gazed down upon my small hand in his, nodded, and led the way. As we hurried down the torchlit corridor and up the stone staircase, I desperately searched for weapons but couldn't find any. Once again, it was clear that my body would have to do.

Finally, he opened a heavy metal door that lead outside, and I inhaled fresh air, thick with the smell of grass and fragrant flowers. For a moment, I basked in my newfound freedom, then I faced Malcolm. "Have you ever kissed a girl before?"

Even in the dawn, I could tell that his face turned beet-red at my question. "Yes, a few times." As he spoke, his eyes were fixated on my lips.

"I fantasized about kissing you for a long time, and I'm so glad that I finally can do it." Not giving him a chance to protest, I intertwined my fingers in his hair and pressed my mouth against his.

He resisted for a split second then melted into the kiss. Before he knew it, we were on the ground, me on top of him, unbuckling his belt. Remaining on top, I lost my virginity, grateful I could do it with someone I didn't care about and not become a fool to love or carnal pleasures.

When he was spent, I lay against his chest and whispered, "Hold me tight," knowing I would only get one chance, and that I needed to make him relax, no matter what. Luckily, he seemed to be doing just that.

"This was wonderful." He kissed my forehead a few times, then his lids fell shut, and only minutes later, he was snoring. Carefully, I disentangled myself from him and wiped off the blood between my legs.

"I'm glad my virginity was good for something," I said, making my way into town, planning to snatch a purse so that I could afford a seat on the next departing passenger ship. Griselda the mouse shifter had probably traveled as cargo. I was above that. I was smart enough to pull off hiding in plain sight.

3

NOLAN

I rode around the Heinberg Estate—my estate— taking in the tree-lined avenue that created shady, veiny patterns on the ground, the deadly calm lake, the weeds breaking through the carefully planted and groomed garden. I could've stayed on my horse all day but knew eventually I would have to face the mansion. With a heavy heart, I left my stallion in the stables and entered the eggshell-colored mansion with its tangerine roof, which from the outside looked the same as it had five years prior. Inside, the hallway was quiet and dark, and the faintest trace of roses hung in the air.

"Lord Heinberg." Our butler bowed. "Welcome back. May I take your coat?"

I gave him my coat, feeling naked without it. "I take it my uncle is in the study?"

"Yes." The butler looked like he was about to say more, but I strode past him deliberately. I needed to see my uncle, and I was in no mood for chitchat, ever. Alone the thought of socializing exhausted me. Since leaving Hamburg, all my conversations had been business related, which suited me just fine. Keeping people at arm's length equaled nothing bad happening to them or to me.

I turned the gilded door knob and entered the library, my head swiveling to the wood crackling in the marble fire place.

"Nolan, it's so good to see you." Uncle Greg rose from his armchair and enveloped me in a hug. "How was the journey?"

"Good. Excellent sailing conditions."

He looked me up and down. "Is someone taking care of your luggage?"

“I didn’t bring any.” I didn’t need much, and I doubted my sailing clothes would be welcome in Hamburg. I had, however, brought several chests of materials, which my sailors would deliver into the estate later. Perhaps it was strange that a man who enjoyed procuring rare and unique materials didn’t appreciate the end product. Fashion had always seemed silly to me; I was much more interested in the practicality of garments.

Greg smiled kindly. “We’ll need to get you a new wardrobe now that you’re here.”

I hated the reminder, hated thinking everything would change now that I had returned. If it had been up to me, I would have never come back. However, even though I was a nomad at heart, keeping my promise took priority. Thus, when my uncle had written to me that the five years we had agreed upon for him to look after the Heinberg Estate were coming to an end, I wrote back immediately, saying that I would come home and take up my position.

“I do plan to continue with my business though.” I wouldn’t give up the life I had carved out for myself.

Greg nodded. “Of course. You can be part of the nobility and a businessman. It’s 1850 after all.”

I smiled, grateful for his understanding. If my parents were still alive, they wouldn’t rest until I gave up my fabric import business, all because it was considered below someone who held a count title.

“Come, let me introduce you to the staff,” Uncle said, and I was grateful for him interrupting my memories of my parents. Thinking of parents always made me think of my sister Delilah, and the choices she had made. Our parents hadn’t been good people, but they didn’t deserve to be executed.

As I wondered whether Snake Island had rehabilitated my sister, and if I should perhaps visit her, Uncle led me to the entry hall where the staff had congregated.

Lost in my thoughts and overwhelmed by the memories my home held, I barely caught their names, let alone remembered them. It was only when the last servant was introduced, that I snapped back to the present. Or perhaps it was her who had snapped me back to the present.

“This is Jolie, our parlormaid,” Uncle said, and the young woman curtsied, her movements full of grace, her hands and wrists tiny, her waist

wasp like. “She will oversee mealtimes and help you with the organization and preparation of social events. She is quite the gem.”

“Pleasure to meet you.” My voice came out rough and gravelly.

Her eyes widened, probably not due to my voice, but rather my words. I had addressed her as if she was of my social standing, not a servant. Given her elegance and beauty it was hard for me to comprehend that she wasn’t part of the nobility.

“The pleasure is all mine,” she said, her voice melodious, drawing me in. For the first time in five years, my desire for solitude and keeping my distance warred with my need to hear her speak. I wanted to hear her daily, not just when she answered me or reported on the state of affairs in the mansion. I wanted her to tell me stories, share her thoughts. I bet this girl with hazel eyes, raven hair, and porcelain skin had a lot to say.

But apparently not now. We stared at each other, the silence growing awkward until Greg stepped in. “Why don’t you get settled?”

The last thing I wanted was to go to the upper floor. However, I couldn’t keep staring at the maiden in front of me. Thus, I nodded and followed Greg. Halfway up the staircase, he threw a glance across his shoulder. “Jolie, please tell the seamster to come by tomorrow at ten. Tell him not to schedule in any other appointments.”

“Of course, Lord Heinberg.” Such simple four words, and yet, once again, her voice drew me in, almost forcing my head to turn. This girl was danger, this girl would become my undoing if I let her. I picked up my tempo until I reached the second floor, eager to put as much distance between her and me as possible.

“You should check out your closet, see if anything still fits,” Uncle said, but I walked straight past my bedroom and toward the west wing, which my parents used to occupy.

“As the heir of Heinberg, you’re expected to claim the west wing. I haven’t used it in your absence, and no changes were made to it,” Uncle stated. Did he really think I was interested in moving into the west wing where both of my parents had been murdered?

I froze as I stared at the sparkling parquet floor in the master bedroom. Last time I had been here, Father and Mother’s bodies were on the ground, and the parquet was covered in blood. Today, all traces of the crime were gone. Too bad no one had bothered to wipe my memory clean.

Greg inhaled sharply behind me. “Don’t do this to yourself.”

“I need to face the past. I’ve been running away from it for too long.” Memories I had kept at bay for five years washed over me, and I welcomed them, knowing my family debt was long overdue.

Liam and I had been hunting the whole morning and returned to the estate at lunch time. Liam was talking to the stable boy while I hurried into the mansion to notify my parents that Liam would be joining us for lunch.

“Father, Mother, I’m back!” My voice echoed through the foyer. When no one answered, my good mood became tinged with worry. Mother and Father were never gone at this time of the day. A clattering came from the upper floor, and my heart rate accelerated. Had Mother started drinking earlier than usual and upturned her vanity table again?

“What are you doing? Stop it!” Father’s voice boomed from above. It was followed by a muffled reply.

I dashed up the stairs, ready to pull him away from Mother, but what I saw left me frozen.

Father wasn’t pinning anyone down. Instead, it was him on the ground, blood oozing out of his chest while the rest of his body convulsed as my sister stood above him, holding a bloody dagger.

“Delilah?” My voice trembled and was barely audible, yet my sister still turned around.

Her unruly blonde curls were a mess, and her pupils were huge. “You weren’t supposed to be here.”

“What have you done?” My heart pounded in a staccato while my mind tried and failed to make sense of the scene in front of me.

“I couldn’t take it anymore,” she said, and I automatically searched for bruises, welts, and scratches on her body, but found none. She must have followed my gaze’s trajectory because she barked out a laugh and said, “Father didn’t hurt me today. I stopped him before he could. He will never hurt me again. You won’t have to protect me any longer big brother.”

I swallowed the stone lodged in my throat, shock and relief warring inside of me. Father’s rages were terrifying. He never picked on me, but that didn’t make the situation any better. I hated him for hurting my mother and sister. I tried to protect them as much as I could, but I didn’t always succeed, especially because Mother asked me not to get involved and insisted she was at fault for causing his “outbursts.”

“Where is Mother?” My gaze wandered from side to side, willing her to appear.

Delilah inclined her head toward the bed, and on the ground, I noticed the hem of Mother's skirt, her brocade shoes peeking out from underneath it. I hurried to her. Her body was motionless, her lips were blue. "No!" I heaved her into my arms, but it was too late. There was no pulse, no breathing. How could Mother be dead? How could she leave me?

I whirled on Delilah. "Did Father do that?"

She nodded, but her eyes shifted sideways, and I knew she was lying. "What happened to Mother?" I demanded. When she didn't answer, I yelled, "Did you hurt her?" unable to bring myself to ask if she had killed our mother.

Delilah's amber eyes darkened. "She was useless. She was just as bad as him. Just because she didn't hit me, doesn't mean she didn't leave her mark on me."

"So, you killed her?" I balled my fists.

The indignation on my sister's face withered, making place for fear. One moment she was standing, and then she was running. It took me a second to process what she was doing, given how incomprehensible it was—my thirteen-year-old sister had killed our parents, our Mother and Father, and was now fleeing.

As I darted down the staircase, the horses neighed in the stables. My sister was an excellent rider, but so was I.

"Liam, get the police," I yelled, running out of the house and passing my friend who was about to enter.

I jumped on my horse, grateful it hadn't been unsaddled yet, and followed the mane of thick blonde curls. Surprisingly, my sister chose to go into the city center, instead of sticking to the woods. She probably had planned to get lost in the crowd. To my luck, several police officers were in the square as we arrived.

"Get her!" I dismounted my horse while the police dragged Delilah off hers. She fought them, which led to her ending up in handcuffs.

"Let go off me! I didn't do anything!" She twisted and kicked her legs.

I advanced until only an arm's length remained between us. "You murdered our parents!" How could she have done that? Father I could've understood, if it were in the heat of the moment, in self-defense. But Mother? She failed to shield us from Father's rages, but she never harmed us. She was a victim.

Delilah turned her nose upward. "I didn't do it."

“Don’t deny it! I found you holding the bloody knife!”

Her eyes flared with hatred. “They deserved it!” she spat, her spittle landing on my cheek. “You are a snitch, and a much worse fate is coming for you.”

Another person sidled up to me, and I faced them, prepared to explain what had happened to the police only to find an old woman with empty eyes next to me, staring at my sister.

“Delilah, you will pay for your sins. You will die by your own blade.” The old woman focused on me. “Nolan, your honesty and bravery will be rewarded. When you’re ready to claim your title, you will find the love of your life, and she will help you mend your wounds and make you whole again.”

A bitter laugh escaped my throat as I remembered this odd final part. The old woman had been a fraud. My sister wouldn’t die anytime soon, she would stay imprisoned as she deserved, and I would take care of the Heinberg Estate as my parents would’ve wished me to do. I didn’t need to mend my wounds. Time had allowed them to scab over. As for being whole again, I never was in the first place, so I had no desire to chase such an impossible goal. There had been enough failure in my life. All I wanted was a peaceful and calm life, nothing more.

4

JOLIE

Something inexplainable, terrifying, and exhilarating sparked to life within me as I stood in front of the young Lord Heinberg. I had no idea what it was. I only knew that Nolan's presence made me elated, anxious, and confused. My cheeks, no, my whole body was too hot, and the four walls surrounding me became too much, stifling and suffocating me. Thus, grateful for Greg Heinberg's assignment, I hurried out of the mansion, not bothering to grab my coat from the kitchen, knowing the staff would have congregated in there, discussing their first impressions of Nolan. I had no desire to know their thoughts. I wasn't ready to hear their opinions until I understood why I was drawn to Nolan and what that meant.

My long sleeve dress was too light for the late September weather, but I didn't mind, welcoming the fresh breeze. Normally, it took me about twenty minutes to make it into the city center. Today, however, it felt as if it had taken me seconds, and when I found myself surrounded by the post office, bakeries, and stores, I still had no clue what I thought about Nolan Heinberg.

I stayed in the square for a few minutes, allowing myself to take in the servants out on errands, the soldiers and noblemen about to start their evening with a lager, and the noblewomen on their pre-dinner stroll, whispering to each other the latest gossip. My breath and heartbeat calmed as I focused on other people, inhaling the sweet, fruity beer smell wafting from the beerhall, the rich scent of butter that seemed to be coming from everywhere, and the floral perfumes mixing together as ladies passed me.

“Jolie, what are you doing here? Do you want to catch Bronchitis? Come inside!” Paul’s voice snapped me out of my inertia. I gave him a sweet smile that said there was no reason to be concerned about me. Paul was nice, but I didn’t want him to worry his sister Tabetha for no reason. Tabetha was our gardener at Heinberg Estate. She was also Paul’s sister, and news traveled between the two lightning-fast.

“Actually, I came to see you,” I said, following Paul into his store filled with colorful fabrics, and mannequins wearing his creations and showing off his skills. “The young Lord Heinberg has returned and will need your services tomorrow.” I studied a gorgeous chiffon baby-blue dress Paul had put in the corner of the store. Even though he was nowadays doing most of the work, the business was still called Schneider fashion, after the sixty-something Mr. Schneider, a childless man that had taken Paul in as an apprentice many years ago.

Paul shut the door tightly and glanced down the street, as if making sure no one could overhear us. Then he leaned against the counter and asked in a conspiratorial voice, “So what is he like, Lord Bluebeard?”

I furrowed my eyebrows in confusion.

“I take it from your reaction that he has lost his beard?” Paul continued with a note of impatience.

I nodded, an image of Nolan’s clean-shaven, sharp cheekbones and strong chin appearing in my mind. “Why Bluebeard?” I asked, trying to distract myself from the attraction I felt.

Paul shrugged. “Before he left, he had a thick black beard that in certain lights had a blue tinge to it.”

I nodded slowly, remembering that Nolan’s thick, pitch-black hair did have a bluish tinge to it. I pulled one of my raven strands over my shoulder and examined it. “Does my hair look blue sometimes as well?”

Nolan pressed his lips tightly together. “No, it doesn’t. You’re nothing like him.” His testy reply made me certain there was more to Nolan than a strange nickname. “Tell me. Why did he leave for five years?”

Paul busied himself, sewing golden buttons onto a ruby shirt. “Haven’t you heard about what happened to his family? That his sister Delilah was sent to prison for it?”

A shiver seized my insides, screeching, “danger, danger,” and yet I couldn’t drop the conversation. “How did the police know she did it?”

Paul stopped his sewing abruptly. “Because Bluebeard accused her of killing them. He claimed that he found Delilah standing over his father’s bleeding body, and that she confessed to poisoning their mother. But I don’t believe it. It’s unlikely a young girl could’ve done such cruelties. I think it was Bluebeard himself.”

I inhaled sharply. It had never felt right to bring up the murders, and no one had ever discussed the details with me, only telling me the deaths of the late Lord and Lady Heinberg had been violent. For many years, I managed to not think too much about the way they had died, but now my stomach soured, and goose bumps multiplied on my flesh as I imagined Lord Heinberg bleeding out and Lady Heinberg’s inner organs shutting down.

Nolan appeared to be in his early twenties. With his sister being younger, she must’ve been an adolescent at the time of the crime. “How old was Delilah?”

Paul thumped his fist triumphantly into the air like I had just told him that he had been voted the best tailor of Hamburg. “That’s exactly the point! She was only thirteen. I knew her. I made dresses for her. Sure, she was athletic, but she was by no means strong. Nolan, on the other hand, was eighteen, hunting and doing who knows what.”

I stepped back, shocked at Paul’s conviction that Nolan had committed the crimes. “You believe Nolan framed Delilah.”

Paul leaned against the wall behind him and combed his fingers through his curly ash brown hair that he shared with his sister. “That would make way more sense, don’t you agree? Plus, that would explain the other two girls.”

I frowned, remembering the conversation I had with Greg earlier. “What exactly happened?”

Paul suppressed his lip corners from tugging upward, but his eyes flashed with satisfaction. “Nolan didn’t leave Hamburg straight away following his parents’ murders and his sister’s imprisonment. He stayed around, enjoyed every revelry, drank fine wine and feasted on gourmet meals after his whole family had been annihilated.”

I shook my head, not wanting to believe what Paul was implying. Perhaps Nolan had been trying to reclaim some sort of normalcy by continuing to go out with his friends. Perhaps he was clinging on to them because he had lost everyone else. I couldn’t imagine that he had continued with his life because his family didn’t matter to him.

“One of those nights, Nolan left a party with two beautiful girls,” Paul continued. “They were best friends and the fairest bachelorettes in Hamburg. Every bachelor was eager to marry them, but Nolan put a spell on them, making them compete for his attention. That night, they left with him…” Paul trailed off, but his eyes practically begged me to ask what happened next.

“And then?” I whispered, terrified of what he was about to say next.

“They drowned in the Elbe River.”

“No,” I said forcefully, as if me uttering the word would make this horrible piece of information untrue.

“Nolan claimed that after a while, he went his separate way and returned home. Very conveniently he couldn’t remember how he had gotten home or at what time and used his drinking as an excuse.”

“Was he ever charged with anything?”

Paul clucked his tongue, disgust spreading on his face. “He wasn’t. Some believe that there wasn’t enough evidence, but I think the police decided to overlook the evidence, given that he’s a count. That’s how it is for the nobility. They get away with everything, even murder. His uncle had probably worked out a deal for him.”

“Impossible.” Greg would never do something like that. After several years of working for him, I knew his heart was pure. He would have insisted that his nephew served his time if he believed that his nephew has been responsible.

Paul sighed. “Don’t let being a parlormaid go to your head. Just because you spend more time with the nobility than most of us and serve them during their festivities doesn’t mean that you’re one of them. You are still one of us, even if you don’t scrub the grime in the kitchen or wash the bed sheets sprayed with piss.”

Each word was a sharp beak, taking a bite out of me. Tears welled in my eyes, and I turned away. Why was Paul saying this? We were friends. How could he accuse me of haughtiness? He knew how grateful I was for my employment, for his and Tabetha’s friendship.

I knew right then and there that he would disapprove of my plans. Paul would want me to stay a maid for the rest of my life. Even if I did as much as voice my desire to become a pianist, he would accuse me of being a social climber. It didn’t matter how much I would try to explain to him, he would never believe me that I wanted to play the piano because it gave me

joy, not because I was trying to achieve a pay rise or a higher social standing. My heart ached. Because if I couldn't tell Paul, I couldn't tell Tabetha by either. I would have to pursue my dream without the support of my friends. I would have to do it on my own and hope that after some time, they would come around.

Paul must've noticed the tears gathering in my eyes, because he handed me his handkerchief. "I'm not trying to be hard on you, Jolie. I'm just trying to protect you."

I swallowed my tears and pushed away his handkerchief. "We'll see you tomorrow at ten." I exited his store, not glancing back. Outside, I realized that the sun had set, and the temperature had dropped several degrees. The walk to the mansion was chilly and dark, and I tried not to think too much about anyone taking advantage of me out alone that late. I knew Paul would have gladly accompanied me. The only reason he hadn't offered was that my abrupt exit didn't give him any chance to do so. But even through my fear, I preferred being alone to being with him right now. Plus, nothing had ever happened to me on this path before. Still, my lungs were tight, and my back only relaxed once I reached the mansion's gates.

"You shouldn't be out that late."

I flinched and turned to find Nolan standing in the shadows.

"My errands took longer than expected," I forced out.

"You need to take care of yourself. Nobody else will." With these harsh words, Nolan spun on his heels and stalked to the stables, the waxing crescent moon painting his black hair a cobalt blue.

5

DELILAH

My journey from Snake Island to Germany was long, exhausting, and something I never wanted to repeat. First, I had to travel across the Black Sea, then along the Danube to Vienna where I would take a carriage to Hamburg. Since the Snake Island was too lightly populated and the residents were poor, I hadn't had any luck with stealing a purse or coin bag. Without money, I was forced to work as a kitchen maid on the first ship to pay for my passage. Fortunately, things looked up in Romania where I stole several coin bags and was able to purchase a ticket for the river cruise. In Vienna, I engaged in more pickpocketing, securing a nice carriage to Hamburg.

As excited as I was to step into my city, I told the coachman to drop me off at the outskirts of Hamburg, far away from the opera and theater, my favorite childhood spots. Before I could return and reclaim the Heinberg Estate, I had to see Manfred to obtain dark magic, which would take down my dear brother.

I hurried down narrow streets, the stench of body excrements growing stronger and stronger. Despite only having been here once, I remembered the path to the witch's house, as if I had been here yesterday.

Knowing that if I wasn't careful, I would miss Manfred's abode and could end up spending several hours ambling down the same street, I counted the houses until I stood in front of the two-story, butter-colored building. The paint was peeling, and the door handle was rusty. Inhaling, I clutched the kitchen knife I had stolen on my journey in one hand and pressed down with the other hand on the door handle. Stepping through the

door, I found myself in a tiny, dark corridor with one staircase leading up and one leading down. I descended, trying not to shiver as my mind dragged up images of guards taking me down the stairs and throwing me into the prison cell. I shoved the memories away.

That part of my life was behind me. I was free, and I refused to allow my past to intimidate me.

A heavy iron door was at the end of the staircase. I moved my hands over it, trying to find the spot where the key was hidden. After tapping every inch of the iron, I finally found a piece that gave way under my touch and revealed a silver key.

My heart hammered, and I gripped the knife harder as I unlocked the door into the cellar.

Manfred was stooped over a thick tome. His milky gaze swiped upward, drilling into me. Despite his young age, his hair was white, falling over his shoulders. His lanky body was draped in a long, peach-colored dress unbecoming of the powerful witch that he was. He pushed a strand of his hair behind his ear, making the countless bracelets on his wrist clank.

"How can I help you?"

I bared my teeth in a smile, letting the anger I harbored shine through. I wanted him to be afraid. The more afraid he was, the better of a deal I would get. "Tell me, do you screw all of your customers over, or just me?"

His gaze flashed to the knife in my hand, and he said calmly, "Put it down."

I rotated the blade in my hand, grinning widely. "Why should I?" I stepped closer and pointed at his fingers. "Five years in Snake Island. That's worth at least five fingers."

One moment he was weaponless, the next an uncorked yellow bottle was in his hands. "Put the blade down or I will knock you out."

I didn't know if he was bluffing, but I was certain that he had potions that could knock me out, melt off my face, and give me other ailments. Thus, I decided not to test how dangerous the potion in his hand was.

Slowly, I put the blade on the ground next to the door, ensuring that I would be able to grab it should the conversation escalate.

Satisfied with my compliance, Manfred said, "So, my services weren't what you hoped them to be? I assume you came to me five years ago? That's a long time, and I'm afraid you'll have to jog my memory."

I suppressed an eye roll, certain that this was just a charade to buy time to come up with an excuse. He must've remembered me. How many thirteen-year-old noblewomen came to him?

"I asked you for a curse that would make everyone believe that the cursed one committed two murders."

"And?"

I ground my teeth. "Obviously, it didn't work. I went to prison for five years."

"I see. Are you sure you gave me the hair of the cursed one and not accidentally someone else's of the same color?"

A scream rose in my throat, and I wasn't sure how much longer I could continue this conversation without lashing out. "I'm sure. I plucked the hair out of my brother's head when he slept."

Manfred nodded thoughtfully. "And your brother hasn't been connected to any deaths?"

I threw my hands up in the air. "Weren't you listening? He put the blame on me for the two murders, and everyone believed him."

"What did he do while you were in prison?"

I rolled my eyes. "He left Hamburg for five years and worked in the import industry."

"He left his home and friends behind for five years, and you don't think anything has happened?"

Staring at the wall, my annoyance multiplying, I said, "Before he left, two girls drowned in Hamburg after leaving a party with him."

"So, my curse did work," Manfred gloated, and I wanted to rip the self-satisfied expression off his face.

"I didn't want him to be randomly connected to some murders, I needed him to be convicted of our parents' murders!"

Manfred crossed his arms. "Did you specify that?"

I gulped hard but kept my expression neutral, not wanting to admit it was my fault. Dammit! I had just assumed that Manfred's curse would connect my parents' murders to Nolan. I didn't foresee that he could be connected to other murders. My younger self had been sloppy and impulsive. I wouldn't make the same mistakes again.

"Why did you want to frame your brother?" Manfred asked, and even though I hated myself for it, I couldn't stop the feeling of gratefulness that

overcame me. Manfred wasn't going to rub it in that I had made a mistake, that my oversight had cost me five years of my life.

"Nolan never stopped our parents. He was happy to watch me suffer. I could only poison them in the house and that significantly narrowed down the pool of suspects," I replied.

"You really thought the police would think he poisoned them?"

"Yes, and I almost got away with it, even with Father barely drinking his poison." I smiled. "My dagger finished the job."

"Poison is a snake's weapon, and Nolan Heinberg doesn't look like a snake."

His words splashed me like an ice bucket. Since I needed his help, I brushed away his insult and focused on the important information. "So, you do know who I am."

"Of course, I do, Delilah."

"Then why did you—"

"I needed to be sure," he interrupted. "Anyone could have used a glamor pretending to be you."

I stored away this new piece of information, wondering how much a glamor would be and whether it was worth the extra expense.

"We're even," Manfred continued. "You wanted your brother to be connected to two murders, and he was. You never specified what murders you wanted him to be connected to. That was your mistake, your second mistake—"

"I didn't make any mistakes. I didn't realize I had to specify—"

"Did anyone see you with the deceased ones?"

"Nolan," I hissed, hating to admit defeat and yet feeling the overwhelming urge to tell someone what had happened, to explain. "I thought I had time to sneak out of the house before he returned from his hunt. I didn't. He found me bent over Father's body. And as I fled, I ran past his friend Liam."

"You were careless."

I flinched, but then straightened my spine and glared at him. I didn't come here to be scolded. I came here to get dark magic. The past was in the past, and this time, I would succeed. "Make me another curse."

"Planning to kill more people and pin it again on Nolan? Or do you want him to die?"

“No. I want to see my brother suffer. Death would be too quick and easy. I’ve been miserable for five years. Scratch that. I’ve been miserable my whole life. I want him to suffer as I have.”

“Do you have anything specific in mind?”

“I want him to go insane. I want death to surround him everywhere he goes. I want to add to the curse you’ve done before.”

“Is that so?” Manfred leaned forward, his long earrings rattling. “And how do you intend to pay? Last time you had your family’s money. I don’t presume you were able to keep any of your gold when you went to prison.”

I clenched my hands, refusing to let him intimidate me. If I showed him how desperately I needed this, he would only hike up the price. In a calm voice, I said, “I’ll give you a year off my life.”

He laughed. “Blood magic is a very powerful thing. But a year would only be enough for one small curse, and only from a person who has a pure heart. Yours isn’t pure, making the price twice as high.”

My mouth was pressed together so hard, I was surprised I hadn’t chipped a tooth yet.

Manfred continued, “For the maximum effect to drive your brother insane, I suggest you pick a strong, magical number of deaths you want connected to him. Since you already have two, you could buy one more, making the total count three. Three deaths connected to him.”

“That’s not enough.” I didn’t care how many years of my life I had to shave off. I wanted to punish Nolan properly. “What’s the next magical number?”

Manfred grinned, showing two golden teeth, and I knew the number would be much higher even before he spoke. “Seven.”

A weak voice in my head told me that ten years was too much of a price to pay, but I shut it down. “Deal. I’ll give you ten years of my life in exchange for five more deaths pinned on my brother.”

Manfred held up his hand, stopping me. “You do understand that that’s just for the deaths, right? Random ones, which will creep him out, but I don’t think that will be enough to destroy him.”

“What do you propose?”

Manfred smirked. “He already lost his parents. Normally, I would suggest going for more of his relatives, but in this case, I would suggest going for other loved ones.”

“What do you mean?”

“He is a man in his twenties with a nice estate. Certainly, even despite his family’s tragic history, women will line up to marry him. You could make sure that the next five girls attracted to him die. This will cement his reputation as the maiden killer. And nothing is worse than a man who takes innocent and beautiful maidens’ lives.”

I rubbed my hands together, a rush of excitement cursing through me. Manfred was a genius.

“Let’s do it.”

He waggled his finger at me. “Not so fast. If you want the ability to choose the victims, it will cost you extra.” I opened my mouth to protest, but he held up his hand. “And may I suggest that for the first few deaths you let the curse work its magic. If later on, it isn’t enough for you that Nolan’s victims drop dead and you want something more dramatic, you may add your flare with stabbing or what not. But be careful. Don’t leave a trail behind.”

I gave a rigid nod. Did Manfred think me an incompetent fool who didn’t learn from her mistakes? Nobody, not even a witch got to chide me like a child. Once I no longer needed him, I would ensure he paid for his insolence and his part in me going to prison. Reining in my desire for revenge, I said, “I understand. What’s the extra cost?”

“Five more years of your life.”

I yanked one of my ringlets so hard, my scalp burned. Five years was a lot, but what choice did I have? I didn’t do things halfway. If I wasn’t in, I might as well crawl under a rock and be a nobody. “Deal.”

Manfred grabbed a new scroll and dunked a raven feather into an ink bottle. “Since this is a complex spell, I will need more than just your brother’s hair this time.” He glanced up, and I nodded my understanding. “In addition to his hair, I’ll need his spit, sweat, and blood.”

My throat went dry. It wouldn’t be easy to sneak close enough to my brother to get one of those things, let alone all four, but I would find a way. “Is that all?” I asked haughtily, not wanting Manfred to see my misgivings.

“To handpick the maidens, you’ll need to pour a drop of the curse into their drinks. Oh, and Nolan will have to drink the curse as well before any of them die.”

“What?” My eyebrows shot up. “He didn’t have to drink anything last time.”

“It’s easier to put a curse on someone for the first time, it’s harder to make it stick a second time around. For maximum results, for maximum pain, he needs to ingest the curse.”

I shook my head. “Maybe I’ll just leave and poison them all myself.”

Manfred let out a tinkling laugh. “And risk them dying while your brother is out? Someone else will get blamed for their deaths, or worse, they might be ruled a natural cause. Sure, your brother might feel guilty that a few ladies he knew have dropped dead, but I doubt that would destroy him.”

My stomach clenched. Manfred was right. “Fine, we’ll do it your way.”

Manfred grabbed my wrist, his skinny arms much stronger than they looked and dragged a jeweled dagger across my wrist. Fifteen drops of my blood fell on the scroll, each one symbolizing a year of my life that I would lose. Once he had fifteen, he pushed the feather into my wound, and I signed the contract with my blood.

Satisfied, he said, “I’ll start the brew as soon as you bring me the ingredients.”

6

NOLAN

Paul, who I learned was the brother of my gardener Tabetha, took my measurements and pressed different cloths against my chest then scribbled down comments like “brings out eyes” or “doesn’t work with skin tone.”

“What materials do you like?” Paul handed me several swatches, not explaining what they were, their advantages and disadvantages. He had been curt since the beginning of the appointment. Ignoring his swatches, I opened one of the trunks of fabrics I had imported and chose the least constricting materials. Even though I enjoyed procuring rare fabrics, I wasn’t interested in fashion for myself. My life on the sea had been about practicality, not the latest trends or making the right impression. I had to adjust my style for Hamburg, but I wasn’t going to dress like someone I wasn’t.

“How long have you been working as a tailor?” I asked, trying to avoid the awkwardness of the silence as Paul took more measurements. Normally, I didn’t mind silence, but this one felt hostile.

“A bit over five years.”

I swallowed hard. I had hoped that given his age, he hadn’t been in Hamburg that long. Did he know the details of my parents’ deaths and that two girls had drowned after going out with me? His response didn’t make that clear, and yet, judging from his chilliness, I was certain that he had either witnessed my family’s sordid tragedy or heard gossip about it. Was he one of the many who blamed me for Anne’s and Berta’s deaths? Did he think I could’ve prevented their drowning had I been sober? My thoughts

spiraled down a dark path, and I was grateful for the knock at the door that rescued me from myself. “Come in,” I said, hoping the person would diffuse the tension between me and Paul.

But the hazel gaze that met mine only created a new tension within me, and my heart rate sped up.

“I brought some refreshments.” Jolie walked over to the coffee table and put down a tray with coffee, finger sandwiches, and biscuits.

“Thank you.” I wanted to say more but didn’t know what.

“Your uncle would like to spend dinner with you here tonight at six. He said he has a lot to discuss with you.” Her pale cheeks colored, and I wondered whether that was due to the somewhat personal information she had to relay or because of something else.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

She curtsied and left. I just stood there, staring after her, not giving voice to all the questions I wanted to ask her, like how she had gotten the job, if she enjoyed it, what her hopes and dreams were. To ward off my curiosity, I rolled my shoulders and neck, earning a needle prick from Paul. I didn’t complain, refusing to confirm I was a spoiled nobleman, something I was certain Paul assumed.

After a few minutes, my inquisitiveness overcame my pride, and I asked, “What about Jolie? How long has she been in Hamburg?”

Paul scowled, and for a moment, it looked like he was about to cuss me out, but all he said was, “About three years. She’s very good at her job.”

The words were innocent, but the harsh tone he delivered them in was a clear warning to back off. Back in my parents’ time, servants wouldn’t dare to talk this way to nobility. Maybe they still didn’t, and Paul’s rude behavior was due to him not considering me real nobility. How could I be considered nobility with four deaths connected to me, my closest relative imprisoned, and me abandoning my own home for five long years? Still, as awful as my history was, I hadn’t caused it, and I shouldn’t allow anyone to hold my family’s mistakes against me.

“Why are you so defensive about Jolie?” I challenged. “Do you like her?”

Paul opened and closed his mouth, giving me all the answer I needed. They weren’t seeing each other, he wasn’t courting her, but he was interested. Whether he hadn’t made his move because he was afraid of rejection or because he was interested in other maidens, I didn’t know. But I

planned to find out, just as I planned to find out more about Jolie. There was something about her, a candidness and truthfulness I couldn't resist, and underneath it, I sensed a spark that burned as bright as a wildfire. It was buried underneath a mound of politeness and proper behavior, but I would find it and bring it out. Perhaps if she was her true self around me, I could reclaim my own true self. The person I used to be before my parents' fights grew violent and Delilah turned vicious and sneaky.

By the time Paul finished taking my measurements and arranged the first fitting, it was long past noon. I had eaten the sandwiches Jolie had brought to my chamber and wasn't feeling hungry. However, I was restless. I needed to leave the house. What I wanted to do was go into the city center and observe the changes, see which places still existed and which had gone out of business. Perhaps even watch a few of my old friends from a distance. But I knew if I did that, my best friend Liam would never forgive me. First, I needed to visit him.

I had stayed in touch with Liam over the last five years, even though our meager and infrequent correspondences left a lot to be desired. Mostly we wrote about general things like the weather, business, and hunting, which worked for me. I was grateful he didn't bring up Hamburg's nobility and what they were saying about me.

I saddled my stallion and pushed it into a gallop, cutting through the forest and arriving at Liam's mansion in less than a quarter hour. With anyone else, I would've sent a note, arranging for a visit. But this was my childhood friend, and even if I hadn't seen him for five years, writing to him to arrange a meeting sounded preposterous.

"Lord Heinberg, I didn't know we were expecting you," the stableman that had worked for Liam's family for over ten years said as I handed him the reins of my horse.

"It's a surprise." I smiled, but he didn't return my smile. I was halfway to the main entrance as the door opened and an elegant lady and gentleman stepped outside. I recognized the tall man with the thin nose immediately as Liam. This Liam was older and less mischievous then the one I remembered. His hair was neatly combed back, and his clothes appeared to be freshly ironed.

It took me a bit longer to figure out who was with him. But when the dark blonde beauty turned, and I met her eyes, I realized it was Marie.

“Marie,” her name fell from my lips, and I hurried toward the two of them.

“Nolan?” Her eyes went wide, as if she had seen a ghost. “I didn’t realize you had returned.”

She glanced at Liam questioningly, and he said, “Neither did I.”

That was not the warm welcome I had hoped from my best friend and the girl I used to court before my whole life went to hell. Recovering from the cold reception, I said, “I arrived only yesterday. I thought it might be a nice surprise to come by unannounced. I apologize if I’m interrupting anything.”

Marie gave a tiny shake of her head. “We were just finishing up with the wedding preparations. I need to go to the florist. If you excuse me.”

With that, she walked away to the carriage waiting for her. I stared after her. I hadn’t expected her to be overjoyed to see me, not after I had ignored her and acted like a drunkard following my family’s tragedy, but I had expected her to show some interest in my return. Maybe ask a question or two about my travels. And what did she mean by wedding preparations? Was she marrying Liam? No. It couldn’t be, could it? Yes. Marie was engaged to Liam.

The sudden realization punched me in the face, and I nearly swayed. Recovering from this news, I faced Liam and embraced him. “Good to see you again”. Liam stiffened underneath my hug, and I quickly pulled back.

“I didn’t expect to see you.”

“Clearly,” I said, forcing lightness I didn’t feel into my voice. “Are you too busy with wedding preparations…” The words felt foreign in my mouth. “Or do you have time for a drink?”

For a moment, I thought Liam would make an excuse, and my chest contracted. What was going on? Liam knew that I was innocent in Anne’s and Bertha’s deaths. He understood that I had to leave Hamburg to keep my sanity. So why was he acting like we were no longer friends?

“Sure, we can have a drink on the terrace.” Leading me through the house, Liam signaled to a passing servant. “Please bring us a bottle of schnapps outside.”

I sank into the pillow of a wrought iron chair and asked, “So, you and Marie?”

Liam’s face contorted, as if he had tasted something sour. “You didn’t expect her to sit around and wait for you forever, did you?”

I leaned back and took a deep breath, trying to tell myself that Liam wasn't unkind but still in shock over seeing me. "No, of course not. And I'm glad it's you. Congratulations."

"You're not upset?" Liam tilted his head and studied me carefully.

The servant brought a crystal decanter and two glasses, pouring us both two fingers of schnapps. I took a sip of my drink. "Of course not," I lied. It wasn't that I was still in love with Marie or had feelings for her, but one's first love getting married was overwhelming, especially since I hadn't been aware of it. "I'm only surprised you didn't write to me about your joyful news."

Liam emptied half of his schnapps. "You didn't tell me that you were returning."

"True. I guess we're even," I conceded, eager to put this strange disagreement and tension behind us.

Liam nodded thoughtfully, not showing the faintest crack of a smile at my attempt to lighten the mood. "How long are you planning to stay?"

"Permanently. I can't expect my uncle to look after my estate forever." I downed my schnapps, distracting myself from my gut feeling that if it were up to Liam, I would have never returned. "We should do something this week. Perhaps go hunting."

Hunting had always been our favorite pastime, but now, Liam shook his head. "Sorry, I can't. I'm all booked out."

"Perhaps next week then." A note of challenge crept into my voice, and I didn't try to hide it.

"Perhaps."

His cold reply fanned my exasperation, and I stood. "Well, I don't want to keep you from your life. Thank you for the drink."

Liam opened his mouth, and I hoped he would explain his strange behavior, but he just said, "I'll see you later."

I stalked to the stables and rose on my horse. If I were wise, I would've ridden home and exercised, fenced with an imaginary partner and burned off every emotion inside of me until all that was left was exhaustion. But I was done trying to be wise, good, or make the right choice. I had gone out of my way to be cordial with Paul and Liam, and both had repaid me with a slap in the face.

Anyhow, I was never the one to do the right thing. Delilah had been right when she had called me a passive coward the night before she

snapped. I might not have been the one to hit her and my mother, but I should have tried harder to stop the unhealthy dynamic in our household. I should have stuck with the second police report I had filed, even after the first one had been dismissed. I should have insisted to Mother that it wasn't right to allow her husband to beat her up, even if she told me she was fine. I should have taken her and my sister far away, even if that meant losing everything. If I had only fought harder, done more, then Delilah would have never snapped, our mother would still be alive, and maybe Father would have changed his ways and become a better man.

But I had done none of those things, and now, my parents were gone, and my sister was imprisoned. I had failed my family. I wasn't a nice man. I hated myself, hated how true the voice in my head was that told me I would never amount to anything. I had believed my merchant business was built on hard work, but what if it all had been simply luck? What if my partners turned on me like Hamburg's elite had? What if Father and Delilah had been right about me and I was useless?

Unable to take my wretched thoughts any longer, I headed to the wine cellar in the center of Hamburg to enjoy a bottle of red. If money was all I had left, I intended to utilize it to achieve a temporary relief.

7

JOLIE

I glanced both ways down the corridor. When it became clear that no one was there, I hurried toward the ballroom. It was ten in the evening, and I had finished my chores some time ago and put in my expected hour of socializing in the kitchen with the other staff. I wasn't doing anything wrong, especially since Greg Heinberg had given me his explicit permission, and yet, guilt always crept into my chest when I snuck out for my nightly ritual.

Briefly, I wondered whether the young Lord Heinberg would mind my fancy. If I were lucky, he wouldn't even notice, given how quietly I played.

With one more glance across my shoulder, I snuck into the ballroom and opened the magnificent ebony piano. My fingers slipped across the ivory keys in a quick warm-up before I launched into Beethoven's "Für Elise." The perfect intermix of hope and sadness of the composition touched my soul, bringing out the true me that had to stay hidden throughout the day.

Engulfed in the music, I only sensed I was no longer alone in the room when I played the final note. Slowly, I turned around to find Nolan staring at me, his eyes glassy, his shirt untucked, the first three buttons undone. A gasp escaped me at the red splatters around his chest. Was he covered in blood? I rose from the piano bench and darted over to him, wondering if he was injured. But as I approached, the strong, bittersweet scent of alcohol greeted me, and I realized the splatters must be wine stains.

Embarrassed by my outburst, I curtsied low, hiding my flaming face. "May I help you, Lord Heinberg?"

He swayed side to side. "You can play it again. I missed the beginning."

I wasn't sure how I felt about playing for him, but it would be rude to deny him, especially since the piano belonged to him, and I didn't want to lose the privilege of practicing. Thus, I returned to the upholstered bench and began the melody from the start. When I was done, Nolan was leaning against the door, his eyes closed. "Again."

I played the composition three more times. On the third time, Nolan sat down next to me. I scooted over to make more room for him, my heart beating frantically. What was he doing? Why was I terrified and elated at the same time?

"Where did you learn to play?" His voice was even more gravelly than usual, probably from the alcohol, and his bloodshot eyes were fixated on me. Somehow, he managed to be handsome even when intoxicated.

"Many years ago, a family friend taught me. I fell in love with the piano on my first try." I bit my lip, wondering if I had revealed too much.

"My sister used to play, but she never sounded the way you do."

I intertwined my fingers to stop my urge to fidget. "I'm certain she was a much more accomplished piano player than I could ever be."

"Quite to the contrary. She had talent, but she played with only one emotion—anger."

Silence settled between us. I knew I should fill it, but I couldn't engage in chit chat when I wanted to ask him so badly whether he missed his sister and parents, a completely inappropriate question.

"Do you play every evening?"

I smiled. "If I have the opportunity."

He nodded. "I would like to come and listen sometimes if you don't mind."

I felt my smile slipping but said, "Of course."

He took a strand of my hair that had come loose out of my bun and pushed it behind my ear. The gesture was so unexpected, I flinched, regretting it immediately when I saw the pure agony reflected in his violet eyes. "Are you afraid of me?"

Was I? I didn't think so, but I was terrified of the effect he had on me—making me feel light as a feather, giving me a floating sensation.

"I won't blame you if you are," he continued. "Everyone else is. Even Liam, who has known me since we were in cribs."

My decorum was overridden by my need to soothe Nolan, who was so obviously suffering. It was inappropriate for staff to socialize with their

employer, but it was cruel to ignore someone's pain, and I would always choose kindness over manners.

"I'm not afraid," I said honestly. "It's just not appropriate for a servant to get so much attention from someone of your standing."

He grimaced and rose. "I might have money and a title, but I no longer have a high social standing."

He was halfway to the door when I remembered the message I had to pass on. "Your uncle was disappointed that you couldn't make it to dinner with him tonight."

Nolan groaned and turned around. "Was he furious?"

Not wanting to dig myself deeper into a hole, I stuck to the facts, "He's in the library, and he would like to speak to you."

With another groan, Nolan reached into his pocket and produced a golden watch that tumbled from his fingers. Picking it up from the floor, he said, "I'll join him for breakfast tomorrow. It's too late tonight. Don't worry about passing on my message. Stay and play some more."

He left, and I my shoulders fell. I was glad that he would talk to Greg tomorrow once he sobered up. However, after this encounter, I was too shaken to play. Thus, I decided to go to bed, my intuition telling me that tomorrow would be a long day.

Next morning, I loaded the breakfast tray with flaky, buttery croissants, hard-boiled eggs, and sweet-smelling jams and headed toward the study, from which raised voices were emanating.

"This is how you want to start off your return to Hamburg? By getting plastered?" Greg's furious voice made me shrink. I had never heard him this upset before.

"Relax, I didn't do anything. I just had a bottle of wine." Nolan's voice sounded bored.

"And everybody knows about it. Today when I rode into town, everybody was talking about you drinking alone. They say you haven't changed in the last five years."

"Let them say whatever they want! Who cares?"

"You, you should care. You want to be part of this society. You need to find a wife to marry. You need to understand that none of the fathers in Hamburg will want to give away their daughters to a drunkard, especially given your family's history."

“You mean because of my family’s history! Most of my peers drink way more than I, and nobody bats an eyelash. Because my family has destructive tendencies, I’m held to a different standard. They’re not afraid of my drinking! They’re afraid I’ll pass down my insanity.”

My heart broke for Nolan, and it seemed that Greg also realized how much pain his nephew was in because he didn’t reply, and silence fell. I took that as my cue and knocked.

“Come in,” Greg called, the fight gone from his voice.

I curtsied and put the tray down on the table. “Here’s breakfast, I hope you enjoy it. Please let me know if I can bring anything else.”

Nolan stared out of the window, and Greg busied himself, pouring cream and sugar in his coffee. Not wanting to further disturb them, I slowly inched my way back to the door.

“Hold on.” Greg gave me a long look, and I feared he would bring up yesterday’s piano encounter with Nolan. Even though I had done nothing to make the young Lord Heinberg spend time with me, guilt cursed through my veins.

“Jolie, I want you to teach Nolan etiquette.”

My jaw dropped open, and Nolan leaned forward, his back ramrod straight.

“Excuse me,” I said as Nolan said, “What? I don’t need a governess.”

“That’s right,” Greg replied calmly. “It’s too late to get a governess for you, but your time on the sea has made you forget some of the social behaviors expected of you. You need a refresher, remember what is appropriate in courting young women. You also need to learn the latest fashions and dances. Jolie would be the perfect person to educate you on all of those.”

Nolan stared at me with a look I couldn’t decipher. He didn’t seem angry. It was almost as if he didn’t mind. The idea was crazy, and yet, in my gut, I knew I wanted to do it. Was I mad? Was I seeking out trouble? Or was I merely adventurous?

“It’s for your own good,” Greg said.

“How often am I supposed to take lessons from Miss Jolie?” Nolan asked in a somber tone, then winked at me. How could a person appear annoyed and amused at the same time? Was this man always this difficult to read?

“I believe each day for an hour or two should suffice.” Greg studied me. “Are you all right with that, Jolie?”

“Yes.” I allowed the happiness I felt shine through on my face. I truly wanted to help Nolan, and this was an exciting opportunity for me to try out something new and ensure I wouldn’t remain a parlormaid until I died.

As I exited the room, all I could think about was, I get to spend more time with Nolan and educate myself. Keeping him up-to-date entailed me reading the latest books and magazines to learn about politics, economy, and social trends without feeling guilty over doing so.

Just remember that you’ll never be a part of the nobility. You get to do this for a limited time. Once Nolan becomes engaged or married, you’ll be obsolete, a warning voice trilled in my head.

I’ll deal with that once I get there, I replied. No one could control the future. All I had was the present, and I was determined to make the most of it.

8

JOLIE

I couldn't believe how heavy the coin bag Greg had given me was. "Buy whatever you need, including dance shoes and other things to teach Nolan how to dance," he had said to me, and I had floated out of the house on a cloud of elation.

"What happened to you?" Tabetha put down her shovel, pausing her planting of spring-blooming bulbs. "You're beaming. Did you get a pay raise?"

"No, I'm just running an errand in the city."

She trailed her hand through her thick ash brown hair. "What kind of errand?"

"Just getting some supplies for the young Lord Heinberg."

"I see." She pressed her lips together in a firm line, and I was glad I had been vague. Even though Tabetha and I were friends, she wouldn't share my excitement at teaching Nolan how to dance.

Not wanting to give her any opportunity to prod further, I waved my hand goodbye, "See you later."

"Be careful," she called after me while I floated toward my future.

As excited as I was for my first pair of shoes, I visited the music notes store first where I picked up several piano sheets with waltz and polka music, the two most popular dances. Then I bought the most comprehensive newspaper that highlighted everything that was going on in Hamburg, and which I had eyed longingly every time I walked past a coffee shop and spotted ladies reading and discussing it. In the book store, I purchased a publication on current economics and one on etiquette. While I doubted that

Nolan would appreciate the latter one, I wanted to show his uncle that I was taking this seriously. I couldn't force Nolan to read anything, but I could ensure that he had access to a book that would make reentering the Hamburg society as smooth as possible.

Finally, I went to the shoemaker, realizing I had been dreading going there the whole day since it was right next to Paul's tailor shop. I'm not avoiding Paul, I told myself, I just want him to cool down. And if he saw me buying dancing shoes, it would do nothing to improve his believe that I was swimming outside my social circle.

So, when I managed to slip in undetected into the shoemaker's store, I almost felt like patting myself on the shoulder.

"Miss Jolie, what a lovely surprise! How may I help you?" Nadine, the daughter of Mr. Frauenschuh asked. Her father's health had recently deteriorated, and with no other living children, it was up to Nadine to keep the business afloat.

"I'm looking for a pair of ballroom shoes. Something simple and not too expensive."

Nadine's eyes widened a fraction, and she paused as if giving me the opportunity to explain further. When I didn't, she led me to a section of beige, leather ballet flats and cream, satin slippers void of embroidery. She picked up a pair. "Young men tend to favor giving these to ladies they started courting recently. Obviously, it's not appropriate for a fiancé."

A giggle escaped me at the comprehension that she thought I was buying shoes so that one of the Heinbergs could give them to a girl. Did she think that Greg Heinberg had started courting someone after being single for five years? Or did she believe that Nolan had found someone after spending less than two nights in Hamburg?

"Do my suggestions amuse you?" Nadine raised a pale eyebrow. "I'm happy to show you a more intricate option, but you said you were looking for something affordable."

I shook my head, trying to get myself under control. "The dance shoes don't have to look good, I just need them to be sturdy and durable." She gave me a questioning look, and I relented since I wouldn't be able to buy the shoes without getting my feet measured anyway. Sooner or later my secret would be out. "They're for me. They don't need to be fashionable, just long-lasting."

She nodded curtly, putting the ballet slipper back on the shelf and hiding her expression from me. “Why don’t you take off your shoes so that I can take your measurements?”

I did as she told me, praying she wouldn’t run her mouth about my visit and treat me as any other paying customer that contributed to the expensive heart medicine her father required.

Nadine was writing down the width of my feet when the doorbell rang, and Paul entered.

“I thought I saw you hurrying past the window,” he said as a way of greeting. His eyes wandered to my naked feet and back up to my face, his eyebrows rising. “You’re getting shoes? Here?” What he really was asking was how I could afford a store that was frequented by Hamburg’s nobility.

“She’s getting dancing slippers,” Nadine said. I didn’t know whether she was trying to be helpful or was adding fuel to the fire, but Paul’s darkened expression made it clear what he thought about my purchase.

“Why would you need those?” he asked sharply.

“Old Lord Heinberg asked me to teach the young Lord Heinberg today’s popular dances.” I didn’t exactly want to reveal this information in front of Nadine, but if I didn’t say anything, they would suspect something worse, such as that I had become a rich man’s mistress.

“You?” Paul studied me, as if expecting me to say that I was joking. When I didn’t reply, he shook his head, and his nose wrinkled with revulsion.

Something within me snapped. I had enough of his judgment. Sure, he was entitled to his opinion, but I had done nothing that justified being treated with disgust. “Yes, me. Why, what is so wrong with me teaching someone how to dance?”

He stared at me, his narrowed eyes softening. His condescension had been bad, but his pity was worse. “Jolie—”

I turned to Nadine, not wanting to hear what he had to say. “When can I pick up the slippers?”

“Tomorrow,” she replied. I nodded and wordlessly put the deposit down on the counter so that she knew I could pay, then I walked out of the door and into the drizzling rain without saying a goodbye.

I opened my umbrella and kept my eyes on the ground, avoiding the forming puddles. A person crashed into me, and I almost stumbled backward. “Excuse me, I didn’t see you,” I said quickly.

The woman's brown eyes narrowed. She had careful patrician features. Her thick wool hood hid most of her hair, but for a curly blonde strand that poked out. For a moment, it looked like she would respond unkindly, but then said, "No worries." Her gaze wandered over me in a measuring way. "You wouldn't by any chance know what a good place is to grab a bite to eat and have a drink? I'm looking for something social."

Without having to think, I replied, "The beer garden." I turned and pointed into its direction, it was just a few houses away. "You should try their goulash or Mohnknödel if you're in the mood for something sweet."

"Thank you." The girl scurried away before I could say anything else, and I wondered where she had come from. She didn't have any belongings with her and she was traveling alone, which led me to assume that she had come to Hamburg seeking employment. About my age, her parents probably could no longer afford to feed her. Perhaps her hometown had fallen on unfortunate times, and she had come to look for a position here in Hamburg. I hoped she found one. I still remembered how sweat had dripped down my back and my hands had shaken when I had first arrived at the Heinberg Estate, and that was despite me carrying a recommendation letter. The first few months, I had been terrified of sneezing too loudly or breaking something, afraid the tiniest mistake would be enough to get me fired.

I couldn't even imagine how hard it was to arrive in a city where you had no contacts. The poor girl would probably have to go through countless interviews and travel from one end of the town to the other searching for employment.

I considered following the blonde and telling her what places were hiring and which once to avoid since they were run by cruel and stingy owners. However, she had already vanished from the streets, and the rain had picked up. With it being almost dinner time, I needed to return to the Heinberg Estate for my evening duties. I had no time to spare, so I promised myself that if I saw the blonde again, I would talk to her and help her as much as I could.

Dinner preparations took much less time than usual since Greg Heinberg was eating alone and requested for his food to be brought on a tray into the study, making the cleaning up much easier. Nolan was gone and so was the staff, who had been allowed to leave early and celebrate the weekend.

The nearly empty mansion was eerily dark and filled with the sound of rain pounding the roof. A wave of loneliness enveloped my soul. Usually, I was good at spending time alone, my mind always full of ideas and thoughts to entertain myself. But tonight, I felt lost and cut off from the world and wished I could have my family next to me.

I considered returning to the city center, but the rain picked up, and the wind was merciless. If I went outside now, I would catch pneumonia. Plus, my melancholic mood didn't make this an ideal night to join Tabetha and the other girls for a drink and a dance. What I wanted was a quiet evening, me and Tabetha trading secrets. Not that I could tell her mine. I didn't dare to tell her how I sometimes envisioned myself playing the piano in the opera house or how excited I was to spend time with Nolan. She wouldn't approve of either. Worse, she would feel obliged to tell her brother Paul, who in turn would feel obliged to set me straight about the limitations of my life.

Perhaps they were right, perhaps I was playing with fire, but what was the alternative? To always play it safe? What for? I wanted to live my life, not squander it away out of fear. If true living entailed getting hurt, so be it. My soul and heart ached to experience more than my social standing allowed, and I was determined to satisfy my desires so that when my time came to say goodbye to this earthly life, I would be ready.

9

DELILAH

Since I had been forced to leave Hamburg at the tender age of thirteen, I had never been to the beer garden. However, I still knew about it. Everyone did, it was the place to hang out, one of the few venues that both the wealthy and the servants liked to frequent. It was a rowdy place where inappropriate kisses were exchanged and promises that could never be kept were made, and it was also a gossip mill. With the servant girl confirming that it was still the place to be, I knew it was my venue for tonight.

I entered through the wooden double doors and strolled past the outdoor area, which was soaked from the rain. The inside was decorated with tasteless checkered tablecloths and cheap flowers. The bar was made from a long, light-colored chunk of wood. The same wood had been used for the long benches framing the tables. Whoever had designed the place was lazy and lacked imagination. Sitting down on a hard, wood bar stool, I ordered a lager. The taste was as disgusting as I had expected, and I hated the warm and out of control feeling alcohol gave me, but the large glass was necessary for me to fit in and not draw any attention. I took a tiny sip of my drink and accepted the bread and butter the bartender put in front of me. Even though I disliked bread, particularly the white type, I didn't mind eating it now. Lining my empty stomach and staying clear-headed took priority over putting on a pound or two.

As I eavesdropped on the chitchat around me, I wondered what the best way was to find out the names of the staff that worked at the Heinberg Estate. I was certain that the old staff had been long replaced. However, my

caution dampened my curiosity, and I didn't dare to ask any questions and thus attract unnecessary attention.

After devouring two slices of bread and drinking enough of my lager so that it wouldn't slosh as I walked, I rose and made a round, listening in on the conversations in the pub, slinking from one table to the next. A few patrons gave me curious glances, and I quickly looked past them and narrowed my eyes, as if searching for my friends. However, most patrons didn't notice me at all, too engulfed in flirting or peacocking, the men bragging about their accomplishments, the women discussing fashion and marriage prospects. The beer garden might have been a place where different social strata came together, but even here, women knew that they were expected to marry, and men knew that dominant behavior would ensure they got the first pick in business and their personal lives.

None of the patrons were talking about my brother, and I began to worry I had arrived too early. I went to the ladies' room and pulled out the magic mirror. "Show me Nolan."

As my face disintegrated in the mirror, Nolan's face appeared. It was dark, shadowed, and his eyes held a desperate longing. Was he perhaps suffering as much as I did? Did he wish, he could've undone his mistake? No. Where was this sentimental crap coming from? I couldn't get weak. If Nolan had regretted sending me to prison, he would've showed up and broken me out. He had done no such thing. During my five years of imprisonment, he hadn't even written me once.

The scene in the mirror shifted and showed me the object of Nolan's interest. A maid. The tiny bit of disappointment within me was swallowed by a wave of rage. The maid cleaned away a tea set, giving Nolan a hesitant smile. So this is what my brother was up to—trying to figure out how to bed a darned maid. Disgusted, I was about to put the mirror away, but then I looked closer at the girl and recognized her. She was the one I had bumped into earlier. She worked at the Heinberg Estate. She could be my entry ticket. Perhaps. I needed to weigh the pros and cons carefully. For now, I decided to stay at the beer garden and gather more information.

Not a second later, a busty woman burst through the doors. Her hair was a brighter shade of blonde than mine. It was gaudy and matched her cheap fuchsia dress that made her boobs spill over.

My initial assumption was that she was a street walker about to start her shift. But I was proven wrong when all the women in the hall greeted her

warmly. Some even raised their dress to show off their feet. No, not their feet, their shoes.

That's when I realized who the tacky woman was—Nadine, the shoemaker's daughter. Five years ago, she was still a child, her body only half the size that it was now. Observing her interactions, I quickly learned that she had joined her father's business, and that her love for gossip hadn't diminished in the least. She strutted from table to table, exchanging hellos and letting out a laugh every so often as she made her way to the bar. The bartender waved at her, and I decided this would be my best shot to be updated on everything that was going on, including how Nolan's arrival had been received. Of course, I had watched him through the magic mirror, seeing how his best friend Liam had rejected him, seeing that the girl he used to love—Marie—was now engaged to Liam. It was clear that Hamburg's denizens weren't thrilled with his arrival, but I needed to understand just how deep their dislike for him ran.

I pushed my way back to the bar and leaned against it, pretending to watch the room.

"Nadine, how are you?" The bartender greeted the shoemaker's daughter and put a jug of frothy wheat beer in front of her.

She took a hearty sip, not bothering to wipe away the foam mustache on her upper lip. Instead, she leaned in and stage whispered, "You won't believe what happened today."

The bartender leaned forward as well, and I strained my hearing.

"Guess who walked into my store today ordering dancing slippers for herself?" Nadine continued.

The bartender threw up his hands. "How am I supposed to know? And what's scandalous about getting slippers anyway? The nobility constantly goes to dancing parties, and they always order from you."

"Exactly, the nobility does."

The bartender clamped his hand dramatically over his mouth. "Are you saying a servant asked for your services for herself?"

Nadine nodded eagerly, practically exploding with the information she held. "And not just anyone. Jolie, the parlormaid from the Heinberg Estate."

The bartender scratched his nose. "She's a quiet thing. I didn't expect her to take a rich lover. But I guess it's the quiet ones you have to watch out for."

Nadine shook her head, her eyes glinting with mischief, and then she crooked her finger in the universal “come here” gesture. “She doesn’t have a lover yet, but guess who she will be teaching dancing to?”

The bartender furrowed his brows in puzzlement, while my stomach tightened.

“Nolan Bluebeard.” Nadine’s voice was triumphant.

“The young Heinberg? Impossible! He’s not into dancing!”

“Apparently, he’s willing to do it when a pretty young thing teaches it to him.” Nadine winked.

I clenched my jaw at the reminder that I had revealed myself to someone that close to my brother, while failing to gather insight on him.

“Gosh, I need a drink.” A young man plopped down next to Nadine, not bothering to offer the seat to the young woman behind him. Both sported the same shade of ash brown hair, oval eyes, large ears, and curved foreheads, leaving no doubt that they were siblings. The female scowled, and the boy shook Nadine’s shoulder. “I can’t believe you’re making dancing slippers for Jolie and encouraging her in her foolish behavior.”

“Oh, come on, Paul, business is business, you know that.” Nadine pouted, not in the least bit remorseful.

“She’s going to get her heart broken when he’s through with her,” the girl said, sadness coloring her voice.

Nadine perked up even more. “So, they’re having an affair, already?” The other girl pressed her lips tightly together, and Nadine sighed. “Don’t be like this, Tabetha. If you know anything, you must share with us. That’s what friends do.”

Tabetha accepted the red wine her brother handed her but didn’t take a sip. “I’m also Jolie’s friend,” she said sternly then added more softly, “She hasn’t told me anything, which really worries me.”

Paul slammed his palm down on the bar. “That’s enough. First, she’s defending Bluebeard, and now she’s giving him lessons. It’s bad enough she chose to get all chummy with the nobility and forget about us, but from all of them, why did she have to pick the insane one?”

My nails dug into my palm hard, and I watched as blood seeped out, allowing the sight to calm me. My family wasn’t insane. My brother was a coward without a backbone just as our mother had been, and my father had been an alcoholic, but we were not mentally ill.

“We need to stage an intervention!” Paul thumped his palm several times against the table. “Enough is enough.”

“There’s nothing illegal about teaching dance to Lord Heinberg.” His sister traced the rim of her glass thoughtfully.

“Yes, at this moment, there’s nothing you can do.” Nadine smiled, probably thinking about all the gossip the situation would generate.

“So, we just sit around and wait until he destroys her?” Paul pulled at his ash brown hair hard enough to rip it out.

“Let me talk to her,” Tabetha said.

“Fine.” Paul emptied his beer and signaled for the bartender to give him another. “But you better do it soon.”

“I’ll do it tomorrow during lunch time. I’ll be able to see from the garden when Jolie is taking her break.”

“Does she still eat lunch in the kitchen with the staff?” Paul asked drily and took a gulp of his second beer. “How do you stand working for Bluebeard? Knowing that a murderer is so close to you every single day? I could barely stand taking his measurements. I plan to keep our appointments as short and infrequent as possible.”

Tabetha replied something, but I was no longer listening. I had received all the information I needed. Tabetha was Nolan’s gardener, her brother Paul was his tailor, and Nadine had no connection to Nolan whatsoever. My brother was interested in Jolie, which her friends might find shocking, but I didn’t find scandalous. Noblemen often had a pretty servant on the side. Father had bedded several women, even though he beat Mother senseless if she dared as much as to look at another man.

But what if Nolan was different? When he had courted Marie, she was the only woman for him. What if Jolie became more than his mistress? If he developed feelings for her, he would ruin my plan. Jolie might be pretty and well-liked by the other staff, but only her friends would cry when she died, if they managed to pause long enough to stop blaming her for getting involved with Nolan. For Nolan to be truly destroyed and for me to claim our estate, I needed a tragedy. I needed a rich girl to die mysteriously and all of Hamburg to blame Nolan. Then, all subsequent deaths would garner more attention and ensure he ended up hanging from the gallows.

But before I picked the right lady, I needed to see whether my brother had finally left the estate.

I couldn’t creep up on him inside his mansion, but a public place was a different story. Once I gathered the ingredients for his curse, I would ensure that not just Hamburg, but the whole world knew him as Bluebeard, the maiden killer.

DELILAH

I slipped out of the beer garden and past patrons that were hunched over and vomiting. Confidently, I marched away from the busy establishment and into an empty side alley where I pulled out the magic mirror. “Show me Nolan,” I whispered. The surface that reflected my face disintegrated and shimmered to reveal my brother.

He sat at a high table, staring into a glass of red wine. There were other tables around him filled with groups of patrons. A few of them threw furtive glances at Nolan, but none approached him. Given the stone wall and lack of light, I was almost certain that this was the same bar Nolan had visited last night and that it was in a cellar. The question was how would I find it?

I needed to return to the main street and ask someone.

About to leave the side street, my exit was blocked by a burly figure. “What is a pretty little lady like you doing out at night all by herself?”

I gritted my teeth, not in the mood for this. “Get out of my way. I’m meeting my friends.”

“Is that so?” Disbelief colored the stranger’s voice.

“Yes,” I replied sternly.

“Don’t worry, if you’re a good girl, I’ll let you go after I’m done with you.” He guffawed, and I had to swallow the lager rising in my throat. How I wished I had purchased one of Manfred’s knockout potions. If I had, I could simply throw it at this prick and have him pass out. Since I didn’t have it, I would have to get close and use my dagger.

“All right,” I said, letting a tremble enter my voice.

He approached, practically salivating and pulled down my hood, revealing my features. “Are you a good kisser?” he asked, ogling me.

Demurely, I lowered my head. “I don’t know.”

He pushed up my chin roughly, and his mouth bruised mine. I jerked my dagger out of its sheath and sliced the blade across the bandit’s Adam’s apple.

Blood gushed out of the deep gash, and he choked out, “What have you done, you wench?”

Smiling coquettishly, I said, “Something that should’ve been done a long time ago.”

He swayed and tried to staunch the blood flow, but it was too late. Already death was enveloping him. He crumpled to the floor, and his breaths became quieter and quieter until they ceased completely.

“Filthy animal.” I pulled my hood back up, pocketed my dagger, kicked him in the ribs a few times for good measure, and stepped over him, glad I had the foresight to teach myself how to use weapons.

Back on the main street, I found a drunk stumbling home.

“Excuse me,” I said. “Could you point me to the cellar wine bar?”

He blinked rapidly at me, and I repeated my question.

“It’s, it’s…” Deciding that talking was too difficult, he pointed behind him and to the left.

“Thank you.” I hurried away, certain it would be quicker for me to check out the alley he had indicated rather than listen to his rambling.

When I saw the descending wrought iron staircase leading to a wooden door with a metal ornament, I was certain I had found the place Nolan was at. The problem was that this establishment seemed much more intimate than the beer garden and came with only one entry, making every arrival noticeable. Since I couldn’t be certain that my brother was intoxicated to the degree where he wouldn’t recognize me, I decided to wait outside and slip in with the next group of patrons.

Almost an hour trickled by. My shoes were soaked, my cloak was damp, and my bones were frozen. How much longer could I wait until I had to give up? Thankfully, a minute later a group of giggling women approached. Quickly, I pressed myself against the opposite archway.

“I heard Nolan’s here tonight,” one of the girls said.

“Ugh,” her two friends groaned in unison. “He’s so creepy.”

“How can you say that? You haven’t seen him in five years,” the first girl replied with annoyance.

“Because we’re not as desperate as you are, Teresa” The girl elbowed Teresa.

“Yes, you’ll marry anyone as long as it means staying in Hamburg,” the other friend snickered.

Teresa raised her chin. “So? How would you feel if your parents were about to send you away from everyone and everything you knew?”

Her friends shrugged. By now, the girls had descended to the bottom of the staircase, and I hurried after them, breathing a sigh of relief as I managed to slip in with them. They headed to the bar, but I took a booth in a dark corner only a few feet away from Nolan’s high table. Given the lack of lighting and my brother staring into his beverage, as if it held all the answers, I doubted he would discover me.

While my brother sat unmoving, oblivious to my presence, the girls ordered drinks at the bar. Two of them remained at the bar, but the third one, Teresa, grabbed two glasses of red wine and strolled over to Nolan, her chocolate eyes glinting with excitement, her small chest rising and falling rapidly. Even as she stepped to his table, Nolan’s head didn’t move. She put one glass in front of him and pulled out her own chair. “Excuse me, you’re Nolan Heinberg, aren’t you?”

He bobbed his head up and down.

“I’m Teresa Daviau.”

My brother let out a heavy sigh like he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, and I wanted to strangle him. I had survived prison, I had survived our parents, while all he had done was travel. How dare he act exhausted and weary?

“What do you want?” He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped away the sweat drops on his forehead.

“Nothing, I just wanted to talk to you.” Teresa’s voice deflated.

“About what? My disappearance? My reappearance?” He pointed with his hands toward the bar. “Those your friends?” Apparently, he wasn’t as oblivious as I thought, and my gut tightened. He couldn’t have seen me, I told myself. I had made sure to stay out of his peripheral vision.

“Yes, they’re my friends.” Teresa’s reply sounded like a question.

“I don’t know if you lost a bet or if you’re being the brave one but let me make this simple for you.” Nolan leaned forward. “There’s nothing

interesting about me. I did five years of importing, and now, I'm back because I must take care of my estate. I don't plan to create any trouble for anyone, and I hope that nobody will create trouble for me. I can't always stay holed up in my mansion, so sometimes I have to come to places like this, but that doesn't mean that I'm seeking company."

Teresa clutched a heart-shaped pendant around her chest, making me realize that her face too was heart-shaped. She was a good-looking girl with her soft brown hair and chocolate eyes. She was perfect for Nolan to fall in love with and the perfect victim.

"I didn't come here to gossip, I truly wanted to talk to you." Teresa chewed on her lip. "All my friends are from here. I've never met anyone my age who has traveled as extensively as you have. I wondered if you would maybe tell me about your travels."

Nolan took a gulp of his wine and looked as if he was about to leave, but then he began to describe the cities he had visited, peppering his anecdotes with personal opinions. Teresa gobbled it all up, nodding, smiling, and asking for clarifications like the good girl she was. Their conversation was so boring that I had to pinch the skin on the back of my hand several times to stay awake. Finally, my moment arrived when Teresa's friends strolled over to Nolan's table.

"Lord Heinberg, you've practically abducted our Teresa, holding her hostage for a whole hour," one of her friends giggled.

"It's only right that you buy us our next drink as compensation," the other said.

My brother peered at Teresa, who nodded encouragingly.

"Of course." My brother went to the bar, surrounded by the three girls. Knowing I wouldn't get a better chance, I dived forward and grabbed his glass that still had a tiny bit of wine left in it. I poured the backwash into an empty vial and pocketed the glass. Then, I grabbed my brother's handkerchief, which he had left behind.

Sweat and spit, check. I still needed a hair strand and blood, but I wouldn't get away with harvesting them tonight. Next time, I promised myself as I melted into the dark night, smiling at how much closer my oblivious brother was to his demise.

II

NOLAN

I paced up and down the parquet floor, my mind racing with thoughts, each being chased by the next, not giving me time to catch up or process anything. My nerves spiked as the door opened, and Jolie stepped through, wearing a simple blush dress that was perfect on her and created a stark contrast to her raven hair and hazel eyes.

Jolie smiled. “I’m surprised you’re on time.”

“I’m surprised you’re so honest about what you think about me.” She bit her lip, her face clouding over, and I quickly added, “Not that I mind. I want you to be honest with me.”

She nodded and shifted the papers in her hands. “I’ll play the waltz first, then we can go through the steps.” She sat down in front of the piano and glanced at the note sheet for a few seconds. Her fingers glided over the keys, and immediately, her body relaxed as her expression became full of purpose.

As sweet as the music was, I found Jolie much more fascinating. The way her chest rose right before a crescendo and fell during a relaxed passage, the way her head moved to the rhythm of the music. I was so engulfed in watching her that I only realized the song had ended when she glanced up at me. “Now, that you heard the music, we’re going to learn the steps.”

“Right.” I cleared my throat and looked away. I was treading dangerous territory. There was nothing wrong with Jolie and I being friends, but the feelings she inspired in me were way beyond the friendly nature. As Count Heinberg, I could never act on them since I was expected to take a wife of

my social standing. Sure, Hamburg's nobility would look the other way if I kept Jolie on the side, but I would never do that to her, and I could never do that to myself, living a lie.

And yet, when Jolie took my hands and placed one on her shoulder and the other on her waist, I didn't pull back. I couldn't. Because while I knew that I could never act on my heart's desire, I couldn't stomach not having her in my life. In the short time I had known her, I had noticed that her steady presence calmed and her down-to-earth nature made me want to be a better man.

Unable to act on my inappropriate feelings, I would have to pretend that I was satisfied with us being friends and remind myself that that was better than just seeing her occasionally flit in and out of the rooms of the mansion.

"You're a natural," Jolie said after we danced for a while. "I think we can move to the more advanced steps unless you would like to rest."

Before I could reply, there was a knock at the door. My eyes shot to it then back to Jolie, and in that moment, I wished, I could take her hand and leave the mansion, ride off into the forest, somewhere where we would be undisturbed and free from our roles.

"You should get that," Jolie said, taking a step back and ripping me from my daydream.

A second knock sounded. "Lord Heinberg, Lady Daviau has come to see you," a bass voice called out.

My heart fell at the name. Teresa was here, and I couldn't send her away. "Come in," I said, doing a lousy job of hiding my disappointment.

The butler opened the door, and Teresa breezed in, her skirts rustling. Her cheeks sported a pink glow, and she wore a brilliant smile, which faded as she took in Jolie.

Jolie curtsied at the attention and asked, "May I bring you something to drink, Lady Daviau?"

I wanted to tell Jolie that we were fine, that she didn't need to wait on us, but of course, I couldn't do that. She was a parlormaid, and this was her job.

Teresa's mouth pressed into a firm line. "Tea would be swell."

Jolie curtsied again and scurried out of the room, as if unable to bear to spend another second in it. I wished I could leave too but didn't have that luxury.

“Teresa, please take a seat.” I motioned at the velvet couch and patted apologetically my much too casual outfit. “You must forgive my attire. I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I thought I’d surprise you.”

I coughed, masking the self-deprecating chuckle rising within my throat. Was this how Liam had felt when I had shown up on his doorstep unannounced? Would my friend have reacted better if I had sent a letter first? No, I decided. Because he didn’t want to see me, just as I hadn’t wanted to see Teresa. Even though she was pretty and smart, and I was grateful that she didn’t look down on me like the rest of Hamburg’s nobility did, I didn’t wish to court her.

“I’m glad I got to see you yesterday at Weinzeit.”

The memory of how much I had drunk yesterday and how loaded I had been made an involuntary shiver rush through me. What was it about Hamburg that drove me to alcohol? I had stayed sober during my five years of travel, and here I was, not even back a week, and putting away at least a bottle. Did I want to end up like my father? A despicable, violent alcoholic? Or perhaps like my mother—a helpless woman, who enjoyed playing the victim and blaming others for the mess her life was.

“It’s a really great wine bar,” Teresa continued hesitantly, and I realized that I had let the silence between us linger for far too long.

“It was a pleasure talking to you,” I replied somewhat stilted, and then making a split-second decision, added, “but you won’t be seeing me anymore at Weinzeit.”

Her eyebrows shot up just as Jolie entered with a tray that held tea, biscuits, and chocolates.

“Yes,” I continued, staring at Jolie while she put down the tray. “I have decided I won’t drink a drop in the next month.”

“What?” Teresa asked, incredulity in her voice.

Jolie’s eyelashes lifted, revealing her gorgeous hazelnut eyes specked with green dots.

“Why?” Teresa shifted uncomfortably. It would have been easy to make up a lie, but I had enough of untruths and omissions. It was time I took responsibility and admitted the truth. “Because I don’t want to end up as an alcoholic like my parents did.”

Teresa gasped at my disrespectful mentioning of the dead, which was made worse by them being my elders, but Jolie smiled and said, “I hope

you will enjoy your refreshments."

"Thank you very much," I replied, wanting her to read in my eyes how much her approval and support meant.

My conversation with Teresa never recovered fully after my revelation. Each time she opened her mouth, she hesitated for a beat, second-guessing what she was about to say, censoring her words for my benefit. She was treating me like a scared horse that she had to approach carefully to avoid getting bitten.

As for myself, I couldn't wait to see her off so that I could find Jolie and resume our lesson. However, my reason won out over my desire. I might not enjoy Teresa's company, but she had contacts in Hamburg, contacts I would need if I wanted to make my idea a reality.

"I'm planning to continue with my textile import business," I began.

Teresa leaned forward, clearly not put off by a count pursuing such a lowly occupation.

"I have a few contacts in Hamburg, but I was hoping—"

"Of course! I'd be happy to introduce you to my friends," Teresa interrupted. "There's so much profit to be made in Hamburg."

I smiled patiently. "That's not my goal."

Her mouth formed a stunned O.

"Well, I do want to open a store here. But I would like your help in donating to the homeless charity."

Teresa's face scrunched up in confusion.

"I want to donate clothes to the less fortunate."

"Right." She nodded. "And you need my help with…?"

"To get all of Hamburg involved. I would start the project by donating materials and funds to make garments out of the textiles. I thought the other nobles could donate dresses they no longer use, but which are in a good condition."

After a long pause, Teresa said, "I understand."

Not wanting to pressure her, I said, "Thank you for visiting me. I'm afraid I must return to my duties."

She forced a smile. "Yes, I must be off as well. I wouldn't want my mother to worry about me." Her features froze as she realized what she had just said.

"It's fine. I know that other people have parents," I reassured her, wondering whether she was here out of pity. But no, that couldn't be her

main motif. I had caught her staring at my lips several times and tilt her head in a way that elongated her neck. Even though I had spent the last five years in mostly male company, I was certain that I could still recognize when a maiden was flirting with me.

"We shall see each other soon. Thank you for stopping by," I said out of courtesy, but Teresa beamed at me, as if I had told her that she was the most special girl ever. Guilt wrangled inside of me. Was my politeness leading her on? I hoped not.

"You must call on me soon." Teresa threw a last glance over her shoulder as she left, and I breathed a sigh of relief as the doors closed behind her. Wondering where I would be able to find Jolie this time of the day, I started down the corridor only to run into my uncle, who wore a stern expression.

"Nolan, Nolan. A girl pays you a visit, and you don't even take her into our beautiful garden?"

"I didn't think—"

"And not just any girl, but Teresa Daviau," he continued. "A beautiful, smart lady that would be a wonderful match for you. Best of all, she doesn't seem to mind your gruff ways."

I rubbed my temples. "She's a lovely girl, but she isn't for me."

"Why? Do you have a better prospect in mind?" Uncle gave me a look that said he knew I didn't. "Don't you want a family? I will die one day, and then you'll be all alone. Is that how you want to spend your days?"

"Of course not!" The idea of returning to a huge, empty mansion after my business travels was torturous. With each passing year, I envied the other merchants more and more for the wives that welcomed them home. Not that I thought a wife that waited for me idly at home was the right choice. I needed someone who had their own dreams. Someone who didn't just share my world but shared their world with me.

For a moment, I allowed myself to envision a life where I had a partner that supported me, was there for the joys and the trials. Someone who wanted to explore the world just as I did. Someone that didn't mind quiet evening strolls. Someone who preferred my real thoughts to superficial pleasantries. The face of the woman in my vision didn't belong to Teresa or any other noblewoman, it was Jolie's.

"All I'm saying is, give her a chance." Uncle ripped me out of my thoughts. "Love at first sight isn't the only love or the best love. There's

much more to marriage than the initial spark."

"I know that." I sighed. "All right. I'll give Teresa a fair chance."

Uncle Greg squeezed my shoulder. "You're a good man."

I swallowed hard the emotions my uncle's words stirred in me. I hoped he was right. I hoped that I could be a good man even when both of my parents had been irresponsible addicts that had neither respect nor compassion for themselves or others. I hoped I could build a good life and find happiness. Right now, I had no idea how to go about the latter one. Perhaps Jolie could teach me. I would give anything to experience the peace of mind, dedication, and glee I saw on her face when she played the piano.

JOLIE

I swelled with pride for Nolan as I headed into the city center to buy groceries. I had found his drinking concerning and had wanted to talk to him about it, but not even in my wildest dreams had I imagined that he would go as far as stopping completely, especially by himself. However, I knew that good intentions weren't enough. His resolve would be tested daily, a glass or two of wine or beer was part of Hamburg nobility's lunch and dinner routine. Parties would be especially challenging. With Nolan gone for five years, he would be expected to stay for a good time at the revelries to reclaim his place in the society. It wouldn't be easy for him to abstain while everyone else around him was indulging, but I planned to make his transition to a teetotaler as smooth as possible.

Step one of my plan involved to stock the mansion with as many kinds of nonalcoholic beverages as possible. I was particularly interested in purchasing juices that poured into flutes and glasses looked like wine since I didn't expect Nolan would want to constantly explain his abstinence to his guests.

Soon, my bags were loaded with lemonade, grape and apple juices as well as several exotic teas. Leaving the market, I was strolling past the wine store when the shopkeeper peeked out.

"Ah, Jolie, so nice to see you! Is the Heinberg household gearing up for a party?" His gaze fixated on my heavy bags. "I just got in a wonderful champagne."

I shook my head. "Thank you, but we won't be needing any alcohol this time. We're trying something different."

“Is that so?” He said something else, but I didn’t listen, too disturbed by the odd sensation that someone was watching me with ill intent. I whirled around yet didn’t find anyone.

“A party without wine.” The shopkeeper tsked disapprovingly.

I gave him an apologetic smile and said in parting, “I’m sure your champagne will be sold out in no time.”

Back at the mansion, I stored away the beverages in the cool cellar, then made my evening round, straightening every room in the house. Halfway through my chore, Tabetha found me.

“I heard you went to town today to purchase drinks,” she greeted me.

“Word sure travels fast.”

She crossed her arms. “Yes, it does. Everybody knows you’re teaching Nolan dancing.” Her lips were pressed into a hard line, and I sighed inwardly, wishing I had commissioned somebody else to make the ballet slippers, instead of recruiting Nadine and her big mouth.

“I see Nadine’s favorite pastime is still gossiping.”

Tabetha stepped closer, her glare intensifying. “It’s not Nadine I’m worried about. You have to be careful, Jolie.”

I jerked back, annoyance washing over me. “What are you saying?”

“Do you like having your job? Do you like getting paid well and being a respected member of this town?”

My forehead wrinkled. “Of course, and I plan to keep it this way. There’s nothing salacious about me teaching Nolan how to dance.”

She huffed and shook her head. “I see the way you look at him. This won’t end well for you. Do you want to be kicked out of here when you begin to show with child?”

“Are you joking?” My outrage turned my voice shrill. “Is that what you think we’re doing? We’re just dancing!”

“Nolan is a handsome bachelor, and you know how the nobility is. He might be nice to you, but he won’t think twice before breaking your heart. If you go to his uncle now and ask him to assign somebody else to teach Nolan dancing, you can still turn the situation around.”

“I can’t believe that’s what you think about me and him. We’re friends. Nothing more.” My heart gave a sharp throb and whispered, “Liar.”

Disgust contorted Tabetha’s face. “Grow up, Jolie. Blackbeard is not your friend. He’s nice to you because he wants something from you. That’s

how it always is with nobility. Once he gets from you what he seeks, he'll throw you away like a dirty rag."

"You don't know him," I hissed and turned on my heels.

"Death surrounds him," Tabetha said as I exited the room.

Not wanting to risk another confrontation and not having the strength to finish my duties, I hurried up the main staircase and then a tiny staircase that led up to the attic where my bedroom was. With the door firmly closed, I threw myself onto the bed, buried my face into my pillow, and allowed the tears to come, sobs raking my body.

Why did Tabetha have to say these horrific things to me? Why was she so cruel about my friendship with Nolan, the first person I thought might truly understand me? I might not know much about him, but there was a connection between us, one that went far beyond him being attractive. I refused to believe that he planned to exploit me. He wasn't like that. *Then why was he flirting with you while Teresa was paying him a visit?* a nasty voice whispered inside my head. *That's what it's always going to be like with him, secret words and stolen moments. He'll marry a girl like Teresa, and you'll be his dirty secret.*

Where were these thoughts coming from? They weren't mine. They were inside my head, and yet, they sounded more like something my strict mother or Tabetha would say.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" I screamed and jumped out of bed, wiping away my tears. I refused to lie down and allow my negative inner voice to intimidate me and mold me into a victim. The behavior of others was out of my hands, but I could control my own thoughts and feelings. I was responsible for them and crying into my pillow wouldn't do me any good. What I needed to do was think about my future and what I wanted. I enjoyed working at the Heinberg mansion, but I didn't plan to stay there as a parlormaid forever. Tabetha had chosen her gardening profession, but I had been thrown into my maid role as a temporary solution, and I refused to allow it to become permanent.

In the last three years, I had saved up money. Now, I needed to save up courage and stay on my path. I hadn't planned to like Nolan, I simply did. But that didn't mean that I wanted to be with him. Yes, I wanted to be his friend and help him succeed, but romantically we were wrong for each other. Even if he would stoop down to taking a maid as his wife, I wouldn't want that. Jewelry and fancy dresses were nice, but they didn't fulfill me.

What called to my heart and soul was the piano. I wanted to bring joy to others with my playing. If I could do anything with my life, I wanted to be a pianist.

But how did a parlormaid transform into a pianist? Straightening my spine and inhaling deeply, I headed to the ballroom. I might not have all the steps worked out on how to achieve my dream, but I knew that it all started with practice and persistence.

After a quick warm-up, my fingers moved into the melody of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata". The heaviness and deep sadness of the piece spoke to me, but so did the calm and steady determination that Beethoven's creation held. Everything else faded away as I lost myself in the music. My fingers glided automatically over the keys, instinctively hitting the right ones, and I closed my eyes, no longer relying on my note sheet, but rather trusting my body's memory. When I was finished, a low voice said, "That was beautiful."

I didn't flinch, the irrational part of me hoping that Nolan would come and listen to me play. I looked up into his haunted violet eyes but didn't return his smile.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry. I need to be alone right now."

His face fell, and it took him several seconds to find his voice. "Of course."

As he retreated, a part of me yearned to reach out to him and tell him what was on my mind, but another, wiser part stopped me from doing so. Because before I could figure out how to navigate my unforeseen connection with Nolan, I needed to know what I wanted. I wouldn't let him decide the direction my life took. No, I would set my own sail. We could accompany each other on our respective journey, but I wouldn't give up my journey to join his.

DELILAH

My cheeks ached and my fingers and toes became numb as Hamburg's strong wind whipped me, the temperature below freezing. Despite the discomfort, I didn't allow myself to go inside; instead, I remained hidden in the shadows of the side alley, listening to the murmur of the city.

After two hours and overhearing news of an engagement that would fit perfectly into my scheme, I considered taking a break until Nolan arrived for his haircut. Conveniently, I had been watching him through the magic mirror as he had told his uncle that he would go to the barbershop in the afternoon, giving me the perfect opportunity to strike and collect the two remaining ingredients—Nolan's hair and blood—for the curse Manfred was brewing.

"Stop calling him that. He's not Bluebeard. He's Nolan. And I'm telling you, he's changed," a high-pitched voice said, and I perked up, recognizing the voice as Teresa's. She was strolling down the main street with a friend.

"He wants us to think that he changed. But did he really?" The friend's face was tight, and I smiled. I was off to a good start. No murders had taken place yet, but the city was already suspicious of Nolan.

"I trust him. He'll prove you and the rest of Hamburg wrong. He isn't the same reckless youngling that left five years ago. He's a responsible man, and he promised not to drink for the next month." Teresa's chest rose with pride, as if she was the one abstaining.

The friend sighed. "Please be careful. I don't want anything to happen to you."

Teresa dismissed her friend's worries with the wave of her hand. "How dangerous could he be? He courted Marie for two years."

"That was before his parents were murdered."

Teresa stopped abruptly. "What are you saying? Do you think he snapped after his parents' murders and hurt those two innocent girls?"

The friend gave a half-shrug. "I don't think it looks good that Bluebeard was the last one to see them before they drowned."

My smile turned into a full grin. The friend voicing her concerns in the middle of a busy street for everyone to hear, it didn't get any better than that. I thought I would have to work hard to spread the rumors, but it appeared that all I had to do was let the curse do its magic and let Hamburg's nobility do the rest to drive my brother insane. Once Hamburg believed that Nolan was a killer, it would be easy to convince them that he had killed our parents and framed innocent, little me. Then I could reclaim my title and rule my estate.

Bribing the barber was easy. A few gold coins were all it took to secure a lock of Nolan's hair and a few drops of his blood.

My unsuspecting brother sat down in the chair and had a towel draped around his shoulders while I hid in the side street. I held my breath as the barber's blade sliced roughly across Nolan's stubble, nicking him in the process. My brother's face contorted in pain, and the barber's lips moved hastily in an apology. He dabbed the free-flowing blood away with a towel that he threw into a bowl, adding a piece of Nolan's hair to it. Half an hour later, my naive brother walked home with a silly content look on his face that I planned to wipe away very soon. How he was so oblivious to my presence, I couldn't fathom. Even the stupid servant girl had noticed me yesterday when I had been watching her, and she had no connection to me whatsoever. My brother's inattentiveness reinforced what I already knew—he was a disloyal prick who had forgotten about his sister rotting in prison. He deserved to suffer.

After exchanging the gold for the barber's bowl, I took a carriage to the outskirts of Hamburg. The coachman dropped me off at the main street. I hurried down the alley toward Manfred's peeling two-story, butter-colored house and descended the staircase until I was in front of the heavy iron door. Quickly, I located the loose spot and pushed against it to reveal a silver key. This time, I didn't bother pulling out my blade as I unlocked the door and stepped into Manfred's cellar.

“I got the ingredients.” I plunked down the bowl on his working surface and retrieved from my purse the handkerchief soaked with Nolan’s sweat and the wine glass and backwash that held his saliva. “Make the curse as strong as possible. I want Nolan to be completely destroyed.”

Manfred’s milky eyes met mine. “Are you sure you want to do this? I can still release you from your contract, but once I start working on the brew—”

“I’m sure.” I interrupted, trying not to think too much about the fifteen years of life the curse would cost me.

“Very well.” Manfred’s colorful bracelets clanked as he added the ingredients I had brought to a bubbling cauldron filled with inky, tarlike liquid.

“I’ll also need a knockout potion.” Last time, my dagger had done its job marvelously, but I couldn’t assume that every future opponent would attack alone and allow me to get as close to him as the lecherous man had. “And a glamor that makes me unrecognizable.” I needed to invade the Hamburg’s elite, and no one could know I had returned until I was ready to reveal myself.

Manfred rubbed his fingers together, making the universal sign of this will cost you.

“Are you jesting? I’m already giving you fifteen years of my life, and you know I don’t have any money right now.” Sure, I could pickpocket some, but nowhere near enough the sum Manfred wanted for his spells. “I’ll pay you back once I’m in charge of my estate.”

“No payment, no potion.” Manfred shrugged casually, but his pupils widened with excitement. “I’m happy to give you two knockout potions and two glamor potions. One glamor will prevent those who know you from looking too closely at you and thus recognizing you, the other glamor will allow you to transform into anyone as long as you add one of their hairs to the brew.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What’s the price? The rest of my life?”

A tinkling, girlish laugh left Manfred’s lips. “The magic mirror.”

“What?” Instinctively, I grabbed the mirror hidden in my pocket protectively. “I can’t give you the mirror. I need it.”

Manfred raised his eyebrows. “Really? You’re in Hamburg now, and you need the magic mirror to spy on your brother? Are your skills that bad? How do you plan to ever frame him if you can’t even trail him undetected?”

“I can trail him undetected!” How did Manfred dare to question me? Fury consumed me, and I paced the room up and down, knowing I couldn’t unleash my rage on Manfred since I needed his help. The longer I thought about his proposition, the more I had to agree that two glamor potions and two knockout potions would be much more useful to me than the magic mirror. Still, I wasn’t prepared to give it up until I knew why Manfred wanted it.

“Who do you want to check up on?”

Manfred didn’t reply immediately. He stirred the brew five times clockwise and then counterclockwise for the five deaths he had promised me and mumbled Latin incantations underneath his nose. When he was done, he finally said, “The magic mirror isn’t for me. I have a client who wants it and will pay generously for it. It’s just business.”

As curious as I was to know who his client was, I didn’t ask, certain Manfred wouldn’t tell me. Anyhow, it didn’t matter. What mattered was how useful the additional potions would be to me versus the mirror.

“Will the potions expire? Or could I use them in years to come?”

Manfred smiled, showing me his crooked teeth. “Since you’re a repeat customer, I’ll add a ten-year preservation spell to them for free.”

I nodded, satisfied.

“So, we have a deal?”

I responded by taking out the silver mirror and placing it on his table.

While the curse finished brewing, Manfred went in the back to retrieve the other potions for me. When he returned, he handed me two yellow vials of knockout potions, an opaque potion that changed its color in the light, and a white potion.

“Drink the white potion now. Use the opaque one when you know who you want to turn into.”

I did as I was instructed while he poured with a ladle the black tar potion into two metal flasks, one holding three ounces, the other holding one ounce. “Remember, your brother will have to drink the curse for it to take root.”

I stared from Manfred to the three-ounce bottle. “All of it?”

“Yes. The smaller bottle is for the victims. A drop will be enough for the curse to take hold. You can add it to a drink or a meal.”

I ground my teeth, hating this condition. At least, I only had to add a drop to the girls’ drink, not give them the whole flask like I had to do with

Nolan. “How do you propose that I make my brother inhale this nasty gunk?”

Manfred played with his earring. “Be creative. Find a way.”

I balled my fists, wanting to smash something at his cavalier attitude. Instead, I put the potions carefully into my bag. “Are we done here? Is there anything else I need to know?”

Manfred smiled. “No, that’s all.” I was by the door when he called out, “I hope this is worth fifteen years of your life.”

“It is.” Hate for my brother had been consuming me for years, and only his suffering would free me to live the life I deserved.

NOLAN

I yawned as I read the Hamburg newspaper, which seemed to have changed for the worse in my absence. It was less geared toward informing the city's dwellers and focused more on scandal and gossip. Uncle Greg was busy cleaning his pipe, and if he minded my yawning at breakfast, he didn't comment on it or my dark under-eye circles. The latter was a side effect of me no longer using alcohol to coerce my reeling mind into sleep.

Ever since I had stopped drinking three days ago, I had tossed and turned in bed each night and that was after putting in a full day of work into establishing my business and working with the homeless charity. Apparently making a donation wasn't an easy affair but required a lot of paperwork and preparation.

When I did finally fall asleep, Delilah's face haunted me. Her amber eyes laughed at me, and her blonde curls flew around her as she danced in the blood of Father and told me how she enjoyed poisoning Mother.

"I hope you enjoy breakfast. Let me know if you need anything else." Jolie's sweet voice broke through my dark thoughts.

Briefly our eyes met as she put down the tray, but she quickly glanced away. She had been skittish the last few days, cutting our dance lessons short and claiming she was tired. I accepted her excuses but didn't believe her, certain she was avoiding me. Why I didn't know, and I didn't dare to ask. Not yet, not when I wasn't prepared to hear the truth. Then again, if she didn't want to be my friend, why had she bothered to bring the soup

yesterday to my room after I had failed to attend lunch, too busy drawing up my charity proposal.

"Thank you for the soup," I said. "It was delicious."

Jolie gave me a confused look, then turned to my uncle. "Lord Heinberg, if this is all, I will now go to Lord Weber's home. I promise I'll be back long before my lunch duties."

I stiffened. Lord Weber was Liam. What was Jolie doing over at the place of the man who used to be my best friend and now treated me like a criminal? Apparently, my uncle didn't share my apprehension, because he nodded and said, "Of course. Good luck."

Since no one was going to inform me about what was going on, I asked, "What are you doing at Liam's house?" Were Liam and Jolie friends? Had my childhood friend told her things about me that had changed her opinion of me?

"He's having a brunch reception, and your uncle has kindly arranged for me to provide the entertainment." At my baffled expression, Jolie added, "I'll be playing the piano."

I felt my jaw drop open but quickly recovered. "I didn't realize you played the piano in public."

Jolie bit her lip. "I don't want to stay a parlormaid my whole life. I want to be a professional piano player one day."

I swallowed hard, taken aback by her honesty and defensiveness and not wanting to say anything least it offended her any further.

My uncle's croissant chewing cut through the tense silence. **"**Don't worry, Nolan. Jolie has reassured me that she will still come and visit us once she's famous." He gave Jolie a wink. "And she'll train her replacement before leaving us."

"Even if this works out, it will probably take me a year," Jolie said.

I gave a weak smile, my heart contracting painfully as Jolie left. What a fool I was. I had thought that Jolie's busyness had something to do with me when in reality she was pursuing her goals. While I wasn't selfish enough to wish she didn't have dreams that involved leaving the mansion and me, it did hurt that she had confided her dreams to Greg and not to me. Then again, she knew my uncle much longer, and how could I expect her to open up when I wasn't willing to do the same? It wasn't fair, but neither was burdening her with my gloomy thoughts. Because while Jolie's mind was filled with visions of a beautiful future, I was troubled by my past. Every

night, my senses screamed that I hadn't escaped the horrors of my family, and that the worst was yet to come. How or why my gut was convinced I was in danger I didn't know. But I was certain that I didn't deserve to sully the heart of a carefree girl like Jolie or Teresa until I exorcised the darkness within me.

Half an hour later, I was in the stables, saddling my stallion when a wide skirt stepped in front of me. I glanced up to meet Teresa's brown eyes.

"Teresa, how are you?" I tried to conceal my surprise as my mind scrambled to figure out whether we had agreed to meet this day.

Clearly, I didn't do a good job because she said with a laugh, "You forgot! Don't worry, Nolan. I'll gladly jog your memory. We're going over to Liam's house. He's having a brunch."

I shook my head in disbelief. Teresa had said we would go to brunch last time, but she never mentioned the place. If somebody had told me a week ago that a girl I had just met would invite me to my best friend's house and not my best friend, I wouldn't have believed them. But this was my new reality. "I didn't receive an invitation from Liam. I doubt he wants me to be there."

Teresa's smile froze on her face, but a moment later, she waved her hand to dismiss my concern. "Nonsense. Marie is counting for me to come, and it wouldn't be appropriate for me to show up by myself. Really, you're doing me a favor by not making me go alone. And if you want to start a charity you need to build contacts."

I sighed inwardly; she was right. The charity had to come before my fears, and if I was honest with myself, a part of me wanted to see Liam again. I couldn't just give up on our friendship because his welcome had been cold. Also, Jolie would be there, playing for the first time in public. I wanted to watch her play, I wanted to know how it went, I wanted to be there for her. I shook my head at the direction of my intense thoughts. What was it about this girl that made me so vulnerable?

"All right, let's go then," I heard myself say, my brain screaming at me that this wasn't a good idea as my heart took charge.

Teresa clapped her hands together and reached for my hand. "We can take my carriage." I followed her tug, very aware of her hand still clasping mine. My remaining doubts regarding Teresa's intentions scattered. She wasn't just kind or trying to be a friend, she was interested in a romantic relationship. As my uncle had pointed out, I didn't have a good reason to

say no. Even if I could allow myself to be picky, there was no reason to not pursue something with Theresa. She was sweet, smart, and beautiful. But she wasn't Jolie. The thought sent a jolt through me as I remembered what it felt like to hold her in my arms as we danced. Jolie made electric currents dart through my body. I didn't feel the same connection with Teresa. Teresa was undistinguished in a sea of nobility girls. Jolie was unique. She pursued her goals, undeterred by her social standing or her fear. She was braver than anyone I knew. Instead of falling into the rank she was born into, she was forging her own path.

The carriage ride seemed to be over in seconds, even though I knew from experience that it took about twenty minutes from my estate to Liam's. As soon as I set foot inside his mansion, I realized that this wasn't just a brunch but a bridal shower. Marie and Liam sat in the center of the long table with countless dishes and drinks. To the side stood a steward who accepted gifts. Teresa tried pulling me toward a few empty seats, but my feet remained rooted. When the first shock passed, I turned to her and allowed the frustration I felt to fill my voice. "Why didn't you tell me this was a bridal shower? I didn't bring a gift."

Teresa produced a small wooden box from her purse. "I got this from both of us." She opened the box to reveal teardrop earrings. They were beautiful and an appropriate gift but didn't ameliorate my annoyance.

"Why didn't you tell me? You lied!"

She faltered for a second but then stuck her chin out proudly. "You wouldn't have come if I told you."

"Damn straight. Because Liam and Marie don't want me to be here."

"You're back. As a count, you're part of Hamburg's society. You have a right to be here."

I was ready to pull my hair out and tell Teresa that I didn't appreciate her making decisions on my behalf when her friends discovered us and swooped in to take us to the table. "Hurry up! Liam is about to give a toast," they sing-songed in unison.

I considered bolting, but in that moment, Liam looked up, and his gaze locked with mine. In the furrowing of his brows, I could read that he didn't want me here, but I could hardly leave now that everyone had seen me. Thus, I took the seat next to Teresa, which put me diagonally across from Liam and Marie.

“Thank you everyone for coming today to celebrate our upcoming wedding,” Liam began. The ladies giggled and fanned themselves, and the gentlemen nodded their approval.

“Words can’t begin to express how overjoyed I am to marry the love of my life,” he continued, and I clutched my water glass tightly. “Marie is my soulmate.”

I drained my water glass and interlaced my hands tightly. Liam’s toast was a lengthy love confession to Marie, and with each affectionate word, it was becoming harder and harder to not to reach for the glass of champagne in front of me. By the time Liam kissed Marie, and the table broke into deafening applause, I would’ve given anything to be able to leave. It wasn’t that I wanted Marie for myself, but that watching how blissfully happy others could be and knowing I had been excluded from their joy on purpose was excruciating.

My fingers twitched, and my mind screamed at me to down the contents of the crystal flute.

One drink wouldn’t do any harm, right? My fingers wrapped around the stem of the flute as the first notes of a sweet melody filled the room. I froze and jerked my head around to find Jolie seated behind the piano in the corner of the room. Her fingers danced across the keys as her body moved forward, back, and side to side like a flower in a summer’s breeze. A shiver ran through me. I couldn’t drink. I had made a promise and I needed to honor it. I wanted to be a better man, not just for myself, but also for Jolie.

Ignoring the tremble in my hand and the saliva pooling in my mouth, I pushed the glass away and took a deep breath. Jolie had just saved me, and she had no idea.

JOLIE

I didn't dare look up after I finished playing the first piece or the second or the third. It was only when I was done with my whole repertoire and had no other choice that I lifted my head. Since I was the background entertainment and most of the visitors weren't facing me, I didn't expect much applause, but hoped that the guests enjoyed my playing and didn't regard it as an annoying distraction from their conversation. I peeked from underneath my eyelashes, relieved and exited when the few lords and ladies that glanced my way gave me encouraging smiles and nods. Nadine, who had somehow snatched an invite to the engagement party, clapped and screamed, "Bravo!" her cheeks pink, her pupils wide.

Unsure whether I was meant to repeat my repertoire until Lord Weber told me to stop or pack up, I rose from the safety of the piano bench and ambled toward him, hoping I wouldn't trip over my words. The crippling shyness I was experiencing was something I thought I had shook off a long time ago. It had been years since my arrival in Hamburg, and I considered the windy city my home. Educated in decorum, I was confident around ladies and lords, and was open to suggestions when it came to my maid skills. However, playing was different. It was so personal, so vulnerable, and this was my first time playing in front of an audience. Just the possibility of Lord Weber telling me I had been awful tightened my gut.

"Excuse me, Lord Weber." My treacherous voice trembled. "I finished my set."

Marie put her flute down and beamed at me. "Thank you, Jolie. It was wonderful. Do you think you would be free in two weeks' time to play at

our wedding?"

"Absolutely! Are you sure though?" My stomach did a cartwheel.

"Yes." Marie smiled.

Liam nodded in agreement. He was more reserved, but his eyes sparked with happiness. "Tell me, where were you hiding? I haven't heard you play the piano anywhere before."

I swallowed hard, afraid he wouldn't want me playing at his wedding if he knew what a novice I was. Lying was wrong but telling him the full truth might cost me this opportunity.

Mercifully, Marie came to my rescue. "Jolie is just starting out. Greg Heinberg recommended her. I ran into him the other day."

Liam's forehead wrinkled. "And how does he know—"

"Jolie works for us," a low voice interrupted, and my heartbeat picked up speed as I met Nolan's violet gaze. Once again, I had been so focused on my playing, I hadn't noticed him. Or perhaps I hadn't wanted to notice him. Because right before I had started, I had felt a tingle, something that always happened when he was nearby. I hadn't dared to search for him then, but now, he was all that I could see.

For a beat, Liam's face paled, as if Nolan was a ghost. When he recovered, he asked, "You have a piano player?"

Nolan shook his head, and my palms turned clammy in anticipation of what he was about to say. "Jolie is a very talented individual. She studies the piano daily in her spare time. But in my home, she's not a piano player. She's our parlormaid, and the best dance teacher one could wish for."

Liam's eyebrows inched into his hairline, and Marie gave me a wink. What that was supposed to mean I had no idea, but I smiled cautiously in return and said, "Both Lord Heinbergs have been very kind to me, allowing me to practice in my spare time and come and play for you. Would you like me to repeat my repertoire?"

Marie shook her head. "We're going to move to the ballroom now where we have a string quartet playing. I need to make sure that they are up to par for the wedding." She handed me a drawstring pouch.

It was much heavier than I had expected it to be, and I breathed in sharply, surprised. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I will send you a letter outlining the details for the wedding entertainment."

No longer able to suppress the joy I felt, I thanked her again and allowed my mouth to spread into a wide grin.

"Why don't you stay and have a drink?"

My eyes widened at Marie's invitation, and I was about to decline, but Nolan said, "Stay."

Marie and Liam left with their friends, and before I knew it, Nolan linked our arms at elbow height and stirred me toward the ballroom.

"You should try their apple juice. It's delicious," he said casually, as if there was nothing wrong with a count walking with a maid.

"What are you doing?" I had meant to sound angry, but my voice came out throaty.

"Making sure I don't embarrass myself at the first public dance since my return."

Sweet as his reply was, it only made my outrage grow. "Are you saying you want to dance with me? Here?"

"Yes," he replied with calm. "This way you can whisper to me the steps and ensure I don't make a fool out of myself."

"But—" I glanced around and found the person I was looking for. "Aren't you here with Teresa?"

Nolan shrugged. "It's not a crime to dance with somebody else other than the person you came with."

My body relaxed at him not calling her his date. My relief was foolish, and yet there was nothing I could do about it. "She'll be furious, especially since I'm just a maid," I tried reasoning.

Nolan turned around sharply so that he was standing in front of me, his face inches from mine, his body humming with conviction. "I never want to hear you say something like that again. You are no lesser person just because you have a different social standing from most of the people here."

Before I could reply, he took my hand, and then we were on the dance floor, moving to the string quartet.

Nolan had lied. He didn't need my help. His moves were smooth, his rhythm was spot on, and he led me like a true gentleman. His hands molded against my body, and I had to lick my lips, unable to stop wondering what his kiss would taste like. I knew how wrong my thoughts were but surrounded by a string quartet and being this close to Nolan, there was no escaping them. All I could do was convince myself that while Nolan was attractive, most of my attraction had been manufactured by the romantic

atmosphere of the bridal celebration. The feelings I experienced were a fleeting fancy, they weren't real, I told myself.

All too soon the song ended. Nolan, however, showed no signs releasing me.

I pulled my hand free from his. "I can't do another dance."

"Why not?" His expression was full of sincerity, as if he truly couldn't comprehend the inappropriateness of what we were doing. Then again, he wasn't the one who would have to deal with the consequences. That realization released a wave of exhaustion within me. Not saying a word, I simply indicated with my head the direction where Teresa was standing, studying us.

"I'll see you later," I said and picked up my skirts, hurrying off the dance floor, hoping that not too many people had noticed me dance with Nolan and read too much into it. The last thing I needed as I built my reputation as a piano player was the nobility thinking that my affection was buyable.

In my haste to leave the room, I crashed into a waitress's back and sent her tray of champagne flutes flying.

"Oh, dear! I'm so sorry!" As much as I wanted to get out of the room and not draw any more attention to myself, I knew I couldn't. I knelt and pulled out my handkerchief, using it to pick up the broken pieces while the waitress pulled a rag out of her apron to wipe away the spillage.

I had expected her to either snap at me or thank me for helping her. But instead of showing any acknowledgment, she didn't say one single word or give me a single glance. Her full concentration was on mopping up the floor.

Only when I touched her shoulder gently did she look up at me with round amber eyes, which created a very beautiful and exotic contrast against her mane of light blonde curls. Recognition sparked within me. "You're the one who asked me about the beer garden. I guess you decided to stay in Hamburg. Is this your first day on the job?"

She nodded slowly, her expression guarded. "Third one, actually."

I gave her a warm smile, feeling even guiltier for sending her tray flying. Poor girl was probably nervous enough as it was without me creating extra work for her. Wanting to help her, I picked up the tray filled with the glass pieces and asked, "Where's the kitchen?"

The girl shook her head. “I got it.” She took the tray from me, and I didn’t fight her, too afraid to create a worse mess and scene. Still, I wasn’t ready to abandon her.

“Do you want me to tell the housekeeper that it was me who crashed into you?”

She shook her head vigorously. “No, I’ll be fine.”

I was taken aback by her refusal to accept my help but told myself that some people needed longer to warm up. Perhaps I should’ve left her alone, but if she stayed in Hamburg, we would see each other often, and I wanted to start off on the right foot. “I’m Jolie. I work at the Heinberg Estate.” I smiled. “I played the piano today for Lord Weber.”

She nodded but didn’t respond, her gaze trained on someone behind me.

“What’s your name?” I wasn’t going to give up that easily.

This question got her attention, and she narrowed her eyes at me. “Desiree,” she said with a challenge in her voice.

“That’s a pretty name.” Did she not want to tell me her name because she was afraid I would gossip about her mishap, even though I was responsible for it? Before I could ponder this any further, there was a dull thud, and then the screaming began.

16

DELILAH

Bewildered, I stared at the scene unfolding in front of me. This was not what I had intended. This was all wrong. My neck muscles tightened, my hands flexed. How had this happened?

"She just collapsed!" someone screamed.

"Call the doctor!" another person yelled.

I knew that the busty, flaxen-haired girl didn't just collapse and that even if a doctor arrived immediately, it would be too late. My brother, however, didn't want to accept the truth that Nadine was dead. His hands were trying to locate her pulse as he asked one of her friends to undo her corset so that she could breathe. How could my brother show so much consideration to a shoemaker's daughter while turning me over to the police? How dare he care more about a stranger than his own flesh and blood? And how dare loud, bosomy Nadine steal the show even in her death?

I had planned for the first of the five deaths to occur at the bridal party; however, my intended victim wasn't supposed to be inconsequential Nadine, but Marie, Nolan's first love. Had I done something wrong?

No, it wasn't my fault. I had been done everything correctly. I had mixed the curse into a heavy beef broth for Nolan, snuck into his house, and brought it up to his room, hoping the fool would assume it was from Jolie and eat it. When I observed him the next day, he looked paler, and I was certain the curse was taking its root. And just now, he had been the one standing next to and talking to Nadine as she drank from the flute and collapsed. However, what I didn't understand was how the tampered flute

had ended up in her plump hands when I have given it to Marie. Had Marie sensed that I had added something to her glass? Impossible. The curse had blended into the bubbles, leaving no trail behind.

I shook my head. I was overthinking this. Marie had been oblivious. It must've been pushy Nadine who had grabbed the glass, wanting to taste the champagne. She had been overly loud and gesticulated wildly most of the afternoon. She had turned into a lush on Liam's bill and then ruined my plan. Too bad she was dead and couldn't be punished.

I shouldn't beat myself up because of her stupidity. The curse was working. Nadine wasn't the perfect victim, but she was well-known in Hamburg and her death would rattle the nobility who had relied on her shoemaking skills as well as Nolan, whose eyes were wide with fear.

I watched for a while longer, satisfied that Nolan's reputation was taking another blow as he explained repeatedly how Nadine had collapsed and that no she hadn't seemed upset a moment earlier. The curse was magical and thus wouldn't show up in an examination, which was a pity with Nolan being the one with the most access to Nadine's glass. I gritted my teeth. Patience. In time, everybody would come to suspect and blame him, demand that he be hung.

Still, the more I took in the scene, the more I realized I couldn't just to let the curse unfold on its own. Sure, it would kill the girls, while Nolan was there, but it wasn't enough for him to be one of the suspects. He needed to be the main suspect, the only suspect. It was up to me to fan the flames of the fire.

Making my lip tremble, I turned and clutched the forearm of the person next to me. "Is that Bluebeard hovering above Nadine?" My voice sounded weak and terrified.

My neighbor's forehead crinkled in contemplation. "Yes, that is Bluebeard."

I stage whispered, "Wasn't he connected to two girls' deaths a few years ago?"

My neighbor's face darkened, and he gave a sharp nod. Knowing the seed was planted, I moved to the next person, and next, and the next, repeating my spiel.

By the time the detective and the doctor arrived, I had worked the whole room. I wasn't naive enough to think my work was done. In the upcoming days, I would mingle in the city and drop hints about Nolan. It would be a

careful balance between engaging the town and ensuring no one paid too much attention to me and recognized who I was. With Manfred's curse in place, I appeared different to those that had known me previously; however, I still had to be careful to not to give away my identity accidentally by saying or acting in an incriminating manner. After all, while most didn't use Manfred's services, too afraid of the witch, they did know about him.

Nadine's funeral was three days later and gave me the perfect opportunity to add to the rumors swirling around her death and rile up her sick father.

I straightened my plain cotton dress and ensured the bonnet on my head was sitting upright before making my way toward the grieving crowd, taking a spot close enough to Nadine's father to overhear his conversation.

"Who will keep the store running, and who will look after me?" he lamented. "My daughter is gone, my only child, my only heir." He started crying, and I quickly swooped in, handing him my handkerchief.

"It's so sad how one day can change everything," I began. "If only Nadine hadn't gone to Marie's bridal celebration. If only she hadn't talked to Bluebeard."

My brother's nickname elicited a grunt from Nadine's father, but nothing else, so I stepped it up. "Nadine was in such good health. It's shocking how she was smiling one second and then dropped dead the next."

"It isn't fair," her father sobbed. "What is God doing to me? Why? I don't deserve all this suffering."

I nodded, smiling inwardly. I was on the right track. "It's almost as if your daughter was cursed. I mean they didn't find a cause of death, correct?"

"Sudden death syndrome. That's all they told me."

A younger man gave me a nasty look and put his arm protectively around the older man.

Time to wrap this up. "I wanted to express my condolences, and I really hope the Bluebeard Curse won't affect your family any further." With that, I walked away. The ball was rolling. The old man's mind would do the rest.

As I strolled past Marie, who was decked out in Italian black lace from head-to-toe, I couldn't help but think what a great opportunity this would be to poison her. After all, when would I get her and Nolan in the same room again? I assumed he would come to her wedding as Teresa's date; however, I would rather not wait ten days until the joyful celebration.

Yet, I could hardly strike now when everyone was wallowing in Nadine's demise. Too many rapid deaths at once, and I risked numbing the denizens' hearts to beautiful maidens dropping dead like flies. The deaths would be most effective spaced out.

The other problem was that Nolan was too far away from Marie. She was hanging on to Liam, who was comforting her, while my brother was at the opposite end, standing awkwardly next to Teresa.

Teresa too was on my hit list, but I planned to leave her toward the end, giving Nolan's feelings a chance to bloom, making my blow that much worse. But as I observed them, I didn't find any devotion on my brother's part. His posture was wooden, and he was leaning away from Teresa, who was leaning in. Despite her being well-bred, Nolan preferred the maid. My nails dug into my palms. Of course, my brother had to make this harder on me. Nobody cared about his stupid maid. Sure, she was pretty, but the nobility would barely notice if she disappeared. Then again, that wouldn't matter if by the time she died, they were certain Nolan was the killer. When he was hated and chased by the town, I would deliver my final blow and decimate my brother. I flexed my fingers, imagining my brother kneeling over Jolie's dead body, screaming out for help. Yes, I would leave Jolie for last. The second victim needed to be Marie. And what better time to strike than at her wedding, tearing her from her groom just when he was the most hopeful, forcing his joy to transform into bottomless rage. Ten days might seem like a long time right now, but in the long run it was nothing. I had been imprisoned for five years, I could wait a bit longer to fully unleash the Bluebeard Curse.

NOLAN

It's starting again, I thought at the post-funeral reception. Even though my parents had had a known cause of death—poisoning and a knife to the chest respectively, and even though people drowned all the time, I sensed that those four deaths from the past were somehow connected to Nadine's passing. The problem was, I had no proof to back up my theory.

While I had discovered my parents and was the last one to see Anne and Berta before they drowned, this time, I had been in a room filled with people. Yet, I was the last one to speak to Nadine. She collapsed in the middle of our conversation, and as absurd as it sounded, I felt responsible for her death.

"Nolan?" Teresa touched my arm, and the impatience reflected in her eyes told me she must have been trying to get my attention for quite some time.

"Sorry, I got lost in my thoughts."

"I was just wondering if you wanted something to drink." She indicated the waiter to her left.

"I'm good. Thank you." I had abstained from alcohol for a whole week, and I planned to continue doing so, no matter how hard it was. Also, I couldn't shake the image of inebriated Nadine grabbing Marie's flute, downing it, then dropping to the ground. The doctor's report hadn't detected any poison in her drink and ruled her death accidental, stating her heart had stopped beating. I found it hard to believe that Nadine, a young woman bursting with energy, had suddenly dropped dead.

I wanted to shake the police, tell them to search harder but didn't dare to. Already, I had heard whispers about me being the one standing next to Nadine when she collapsed and what it meant. I didn't need to draw attention to myself, especially when I had no evidence and only a hunch that foul play was involved.

But who would want to harm Nadine and why?

I had no answers. All I knew was that I had to leave the stuffy room, its powdery scent, and the sea of mourners dressed in black. The polite thing would have been to tell Teresa, but she had just started talking to a friend, and I didn't have the energy to explain to her why I was leaving so early. Thus, I took the coward's way and slipped out only to discover that Jolie had also chosen that moment to leave the post-funeral reception. She had played Chopin's funeral march earlier; the piece's beautiful sadness had both eased and intensified my anguish.

I wanted to be alone, and yet when Jolie said, "Are you leaving? We could walk home together," no refusals spilled across my lips.

For a few minutes, we walked in silence, and I mulled over Nadine's death and what could've been done to prevent it.

As if reading my thoughts, Jolie said, "How are you coping? I can't imagine what it's like to talk to someone one moment only to watch them collapse the next moment, unable to do anything."

"I feel awful," I admitted, taken aback by how easy it was to be honest with Jolie and how freeing it was to speak my mind.

With anyone else, I would have filtered my real thoughts, afraid my confession would cast a negative light on me and make the other person wonder whether I had been responsible for Nadine's death.

But with Jolie I had no such fears, and clearly, she didn't think I was responsible, because she reached for my arm and said, "There was nothing you could have done. You were exposed to a painful and terrifying event, and you're doing your best to cope with that."

"Thank you," I pressed out, her compassion simultaneously choking me up, and loosening a knot inside of me. Before I knew what was happening to me, the worries that had been plaguing me for days flew off my tongue. "It's not just that. Nadine's death also brought up memories of Anne's and Berta's drownings. I was the last one to see them. Even though I arrived home with my clothes dry and was seen by my stable boy, who vouched for

me, I often wondered if I was responsible for their deaths. I have no recollection of being by the river, but…."

Jolie shook her head vehemently. "You were at the wrong place at the wrong time. Back then and now again you were an innocent bystander."

I stopped walking abruptly. "Why are you so certain of my goodness? You barely know me. Has anyone told you what happened five years ago?"

"Your sister killed your parents, and you turned her in," Jolie replied quietly. "You did the right thing."

I shook my head. "I had to turn her in. But before she snapped, my parents were awful to her. If only I had paid more attention and helped her more, she would have never gone as far as she did."

Jolie's soft face turned fierce, and she seemed to grow a few inches taller. "Listen to me, Nolan Heinberg. You are not responsible for another person's behavior. You only have control over your own actions and reactions. Your sister chose to kill your parents. It doesn't matter how hopeless she felt; there were other ways out of the situation. She could have left. She could have avoided them. She could have asked to go to a monastery or a boarding school."

My mouth had fallen open as Jolie spoke, and now, I closed it, having no retort. She was right, there were so many other ways my sister could have handled the situation.

"Did she ever come to you and said that she was thinking about murdering your parents?" Jolie continued.

I shook my head.

"Then that too was on her. She could have asked you for help. She could have asked other people for help. She didn't. She chose the easiest path and gave into her hate."

"But—"

Jolie interrupted me again, "Is it easy for you not to drink, Nolan?"

"No."

She nodded eagerly, as if she had expected that answer. "And yet, you abstain. You abstain at parties and funerals. You abstain from drinking to increase your happiness and to drown your sorrows. You make the decision to abstain every day, even though it's hard, and drinking would be so much easier. That's how I know you're a good person. Because you try. Our past and the issues of our families can only define us if we allow them to. Every

day, you make the decision to be better than your parents and your sister. You deserve to be proud of yourself."

Floored by what Jolie had said, it took me a moment to realize I had closed the distance between us and that my hand was tangled in her hair, a finger trailing down her cheek. My lips hovered in front of hers, the need to kiss her overwhelming. I was falling in love, and there was nothing I could or wanted to do about it.

Her expression was filled with longing and hope, and I brushed my lips carefully against hers.

"What are you doing?" Her breath quivered.

Immediately, I dropped my hands to my sides and took a step back. "I'm sorry. I thought you wanted…."

Several expressions flitted across her face—shock, tenderness, confusion, and finally, panic. She broke out into a run, her black dress billowing behind her.

"Jolie!" I screamed but didn't dare to follow her. Why did I always have to mess everything up? Giving into my attraction might have cost me the only true friend I had.

JOLIE

I ran, not looking back. I didn't slow down when my lungs ached or I developed a side stitch. Instead, I pressed on, welcoming the physical pain. At first, I told myself I was running away from Nolan and the kiss, but the longer I thought about it, the more I had to admit that I was running away because of my response to his kiss and the feelings it stirred in me. A romance with Nolan was out of the question. I had promised Tabetha that we were just friends, and that's exactly how I needed to keep it, especially since Nolan was courting Teresa.

If Nolan had any genuine interest in me, he wouldn't accompany Teresa to social events. But, of course, he couldn't have any serious and honest intentions toward me. Not only was he a count, but he was the most controversial one given his family's history. He had to do everything to hold on to his status. The last thing he needed was to have a relationship with a maid.

Each of these realizations was like a dagger to my heart. I didn't judge Nolan for what he had to do, but that didn't make the cruel reality any easier to bear. The way he had been with me—gentle and cautious—didn't make me think that he was maliciously trying to make me his dirty secret. Yet, in the end, his intentions wouldn't matter. I would be the one that got burned. It didn't matter how strong of a pull we felt toward each other. Nolan had obligations; obligations he could only satisfy with a girl like Teresa.

Neither Teresa nor I deserved to have only one half of a man. Just how Nolan neither deserved losing his title nor being stuck in a dull marriage.

The first one a given if he chose me, the second one a given if he chose Teresa. Or was it? Perhaps he wasn't bored with Teresa. Perhaps I was imagining that, my jealousy blinding me.

I sighed. Either way, whether Nolan liked Teresa or not, I had to stay away from him. We were from two different worlds that weren't meant to intersect.

My feet slowed down as the mansion came into view, yet my breathing was still heavy as I stumbled toward the door, careful to avoid rousing Tabetha's attention, who was cutting the hedge. Fortunately, I didn't run into anyone as I made my way up the main staircase and then my tiny one, leading into my attic bedroom. Ready to throw myself onto my pillow and sleep, I swung the door open and froze in my tracks. My room was a mess. My piano sheets covered the floor; each paper shredded into tiny pieces. My pillow was ripped open, the feathers dusting my bed. My trunk was upside down, my clothes spilling out of it, slit into ribbons. However, it was the paint smeared across the wall that made me sink to the ground. The red letters read, "Lazy, talentless harlot."

I knew there was no point crying over this. I should clean up this mess before anyone discovered the nastiness, yet my body refused to move as my chest rose and fell with ugly whimpers.

Crouched on the floor and sobbing was how Tabetha found me some time later. Even in my state, I knew it was her, her sturdy gardening shoes giving her away as she climbed up the wooden staircase.

"Jolie! Oh my God!" Tabetha took in the destruction for several seconds before kneeling next to me and pressing me against her chest. "Do you know who did this?"

I sobbed harder and shook my head.

"Did you fight with anyone?"

"No." My jaw trembled so badly, my teeth chattered.

"Did you perhaps do something you weren't supposed to?" When I didn't reply, she added, "With Nolan?"

The guilt must have been written on my face because she said, "Oh Jolie, I told you to stay away from him. He's no good."

I lowered my head, my shame overwhelming me. It had been wrong to let Nolan kiss me, and yet, alone thinking about it made me want to do it again, experience the sweetness of his lips once more. As guilty as I felt, I didn't think the kiss was responsible for the wreckage of my room and

belongings. The kiss had happened today, and I seriously doubted someone could have overseen it and beat me to the mansion when I had been running all the way home. The destruction would have taken too long, and the perpetrator had to come prepared with a bucket of paint to vandalize my wall.

This was premeditated. Someone had hated me before the kiss with Nolan.

"Do you think Teresa did it?" Tabetha ripped me out of my thoughts.

"No," I answered in disbelief. "She's a sweet, polite girl."

Tabetha clucked her tongue disapprovingly. "She's a girl desperate for Nolan to marry her. I bet she's jealous of the attraction between you and him, which she clearly doesn't share with him."

Heat rose within me at Tabetha's bluntness. I pushed it down, choosing to focus on the first part of what she had said. "Why do you think she's desperate to marry Nolan?"

Tabetha let out a sharp laugh. "Gosh, Jolie! How can you be so smart, and yet so naive? Teresa's family has a lot of financial problems caused by her father's gambling. They need to marry her off to a rich guy. So far, they were only able to find men twice Teresa's age in faraway cities. Teresa is desperate to stay in Hamburg and prepared to throw herself at any bachelor her age. Nolan's image might be sullied, but his gold bags are heavier than ever."

I raised my eyebrows in confusion, which earned me another sigh.

"Nolan is rough around the edges, but he worked really hard and closed some big merchant deals. He has doubled his family's fortune in the last five years."

"How do you know all of this?"

Tabetha shrugged. "People talk. I hear bits and pieces here and there. You would too if you bothered to listen, instead of living in your dreamworld."

I ignored her chiding. "Maybe Teresa simply likes Nolan, and him being a rich bachelor in Hamburg is just a bonus."

Tabetha crossed her arms. "You need to stop thinking the best of everyone. Just because you find hopeless cases attractive doesn't mean the rest of us do. Teresa is a shrewd girl. I overheard her bragging to her friends how she had managed to get 'Bluebeard the Recluse' to attend Marie's engagement party and Nadine's funeral."

I shook my head. “Teresa wouldn’t do that.”

“Is that so?” Tabetha pulled me up to my feet. “After we clean up this mess, and you report it to the old Lord Heinberg, I’m taking you to the visiting exhibition. It will be good for you to see the latest inventions, to take your mind off this—” She waved her arms around the chaos that my room was. “— but more importantly, Teresa will be there, giving her friends the latest updates on her courtship with Nolan. If you don’t believe me that she’s a self-serving wench, it’s time for you to hear the information straight from the horse’s mouth.”

The building the exhibition took place was vast and had tall ceilings. It was packed with inventions and people. The first stand I noticed was showcasing a sewing machine powered by a hand crank.

“What does Paul think of this?” I asked Tabetha.

She shrugged her shoulders. “My brother hasn’t gotten one yet. He prefers sticking to the old way of doing things. He’ll probably only buy one if the competition does.” She smiled. “Thankfully, the gardening business is less changeable than tailoring.”

I nodded, silently wondering what would happen if a way to record music were to be invented. Would it cut down on live performances? Or would it make them more precious? Both, I decided. The possibility of listening to music wherever and whenever I wanted filled me with longing. However, as hard as I looked, I didn’t find any music inventions at the fair. I did see, however, lots of amusing novelties, such as the heliographic engraving, which was a fascinating way to create an image. A light-sensitive asphalt was poured on top of a glass or metal plate. The upper layer hardened in proportion to its exposure to light, and when the plate was washed off with lavender oil, only the hardened areas remained, creating a picture. If it had been up to me, I would have stayed longer and looked at all the heliographic images, but Tabetha pulled me away.

“She’s here,” she said, and I followed her gaze to find Teresa a few stalls away with her friends, looking at some silks.

Tabetha pulled me toward Teresa, using an exhibition stand for cover.

“This is wrong,” I whispered. I already felt guilty about my attraction for Nolan. I didn’t need anything else to add to my shame.

“Shh.” Tabetha put her finger against my lips.

Knowing she wouldn’t back down, I decided to play along just this once. Also, a tiny piece of me was interested in listening in on Teresa’s

conversation, no matter how rotten that was. I wanted to know what the girl that pursued Nolan so fiercely thought.

I didn't have to wait long for the girls to mention Teresa's love life. "How are things progressing with Nolan?" her wide-shouldered friend asked.

"He went to the funeral reception but left abruptly without saying goodbye to you, right?" her tall friend added.

Teresa grimaced. "He was upset by Nadine's death."

"But he's the man! He's supposed to catch you if you faint over the dead body at the funeral, not the other way around."

Teresa shrugged. "It will take him a while to readjust to being part of Hamburg's society and how things run here." She winked. "But don't worry. Give me a year, and he'll be under my thumb."

"So, you think he'll marry you?" the tall friend asked with excitement.

Teresa rolled her eyes. "Of course, he will. He has no other choice. Who else is he going to marry besides me? I'm the only one brave enough to take on his past."

The short friend giggled. "But only because of his money."

Teresa gave a wolfish smile.

Guffawing, the trio strutted away. Tabetha attempted to follow them, but I stopped her.

"I've heard enough." Now that I knew how Teresa truly felt about Nolan, I was done feeling guilty. I was done being subservient. I might not be of blue blood, but I deserved happiness as did Nolan.

19

NOLAN

I entered the mansion with the plan to find Jolie and apologize for the kiss, which I now realized had been a horrible idea, no matter how right it had felt in the moment. However, before I could find her, I ran into Uncle Greg.

"Somebody destroyed Jolie's room," he said, his eyelid twitching.

"What?" I didn't even pretend to act like I had no idea where her room was, storming up the stairs to the attic. It was only once my hand grasped the door handle that I realized how frightened Jolie would be if I charged into her room. Taking a deep breath, I knocked. Painful silent seconds followed, but I forced myself to knock again and waited a few more seconds before entering.

I didn't find Jolie inside; instead, a disarrayed room greeted me. My heart ached at the writing on the wall calling her a lazy and talentless harlot. What cruelty.

My fists clenched and unclenched, and without turning toward my uncle, who was wheezing, I demanded, "Who did this?"

"We don't know."

"Why hasn't it been cleaned up?"

"We only just discovered this mess." Uncle Greg had barely finished his sentence when I left to fetch a maid from the kitchen. While she cleaned the ground, I wiped away the red paint and made an inventory of all the things that needed to be replaced.

"What are you doing?" Uncle asked as I grabbed my coat, which I had discarded earlier.

“Making sure everything that was destroyed is replaced.”

“We can send somebody else into the city. This is not a task for you to do.”

I stepped closer toward my uncle, allowing him to see the determination in my eyes. “This is exactly what I need to do. Do you really think I’m innocent in all of this after I made Jolie give me dance lessons and after I encouraged her piano playing?”

My uncle’s expression softened. “She isn’t Delilah. Jolie is a strong girl. She can handle this.”

I gave a sharp nod. “Yes, she can, but that doesn’t mean she has to handle this on her own. After everything she’s done for me, it’s time for me to support her.”

Uncle Greg’s attention swiveled to the maid still cleaning the room, whose ears had perked up. I ignored his warning. I wanted everyone to know that if they messed with Jolie, they messed with me. Meeting the maid’s gaze, I said, “You can pass this message officially to the rest of the staff. I will find the perpetrator, and the person will be punished. If anyone hurts Jolie ever again, there will be severe repercussions. Is this clear?”

“Yes,” the maid replied.

A few hours later, I was putting away the last item I had purchased for Jolie, new ballet slippers, when the door opened, and she found me kneeling in front of her trunk.

She opened her mouth, then closed it, the state of her room enough to explain what I was doing.

“You shouldn’t have. How much do I owe you?” she finally said.

I shook my head firmly. “You owe me nothing.”

“But—”

“I’m not taking your money, and it’s not up to debate.” I stepped closer, and she blinked rapidly, fixating on my lips.

Was she afraid of me? I hoped not, that would be too much to bear. “I apologize for the kiss. It won’t happen again, I promise.” Confusion whirled in her eyes, and I felt I had to give her more of an explanation. “I really thought you felt the same way as I did, that you felt the pull between us. I would have never kissed you if I hadn’t thought that you wanted this.” With my heart as heavy as a slab of concrete, I tried walking past her, but she took my arm, stopping me in my tracks.

“I did want you to kiss me. And I want you to kiss me now.”

She didn’t need to tell me twice. Our lips collided, claiming each other. Her honey smell engulfed me. Her arms came around my neck, and mine stroked her back, pulling her into me. Closer, closer, closer. I couldn’t get enough. Our mouths parted, and our tongues intertwined. Her soft curves pressed against my hard body. I wanted to freeze this moment. I never wanted to let her go.

Eventually, Jolie pulled away. Breathing hard, I gazed into her wide pupils, noticing the puffiness and redness of her lips. I was responsible for that just how she was responsible for the passion running through my veins, the quick beating of my heart. I wanted to make her feel like this daily. I wanted to feel like this daily.

“That was amazing, but we can’t carry on like this.” Jolie shattered the moment. “I don’t want to be your secret.” Sadness colored her hazel eyes, and I wished I could kiss it away. “I won’t be your mistress while you marry Teresa or some other girl.”

My eyebrows shot up. “That’s what you think will happen? I would never do that to you.” At her sober expression, I added, “I’m not going to marry Teresa.”

“She’s convinced you will. She thinks she’s the only one to provide you with a reentry into Hamburg’s society.”

“And I’m the one to get her family out of financial trouble.” Jolie’s eyes widened in surprise. “Yes, I know about that. I might have been away, and I might not be up to speed on fashion, but I’m still smart enough to conduct background checks on people who show sudden interest in me.”

“What are you planning to do?”

“So far, Teresa seems to be content to be friends. I hope I can convince her that this is best for us.”

Jolie shook her head energetically. “She won’t agree to that.”

“I will propose a deal to her. She helps me reenter Hamburg’s society, and I pay her a handsome sum of money, which will take care of her family’s imminent troubles.”

Jolie swallowed hard. “It should work in theory, but you’re forgetting about her pride.”

I shrugged. “Better to injure her pride than put us both into a loveless marriage that would end in resentment.”

Jolie gave me a tentative smile. “Are you sure you want to do this? Are you sure I’m worth the risk and hassle?”

“It’s no hassle, and you’re worth every risk.” With one hand, I pulled her toward me, using my other to trail her cheek. “I want you. I’ve never been as certain about anything in my life before.”

Our lips melted into a long kiss. That night we stayed up late, holding hands, our bodies pressed close while we devised a plan about how to best handle Teresa.

Two days later, I called on Teresa. As I waited for her to join me in the sitting room, uneasiness gnawed at me. Was I making a huge mistake? Was Jolie right, and would Teresa’s pride get in the way of us making a deal? I shook my head. I couldn’t afford to think negatively. If Teresa sensed my uncertainty, she would pounce on it and try to convince me that we should get married. And once the conversation started down that path, it would be extremely hard to let her down easy.

“I’m so glad you came.” Teresa busted into the room, and I couldn’t help but notice the extra care she had put into her appearance. Her blue silk dress was much too fancy for this early in the day, and her hair and makeup were too elaborate. Not a good sign. Should I have met her somewhere else, to not give off the impression that I was courting her? Perhaps, but the topic we were about to discuss was too delicate to air it in public.

“Thank you for seeing me. I have a proposition for you.” I sat down and busied myself with the tea the butler had served, making it clear that I wouldn’t hug her or kiss her cheek in greeting.

Her eyes lit up at the word proposition, but her face soured at my lack of physical contact. She sat down on the couch opposite from mine and folded her hands firmly in her lap. “I’m listening.”

“We both have something the other one needs.”

She pressed her lips firmly together but didn’t reply, which I took as a sign to continue.

“My return to Hamburg hasn’t exactly been a warm one. Given my family’s history, I understand the hesitation to trust me, but I am neither my parents nor my sister, and I should be judged and treated according to my behavior and not theirs.”

Teresa gave the tiniest nod of acknowledgement, and I wondered if a part of her too judged my dark past. *Are you sure you want to do this?* a voice inside my head asked. *This might not end well.* Yes, I wanted to do this. Better to give this a try and risk a confrontation than continue with the

lies and pretense. “I need your help to reenter Hamburg’s society, and your family needs my money.”

Teresa stiffened, and fury ignited in her brown eyes. “How dare you?”

“Please hear me out. I’m not saying this to attack you. I’m saying this because it is a sad truth that needs to be acknowledged to improve both of our situations.” I leaned forward and put my elbows on my knees. “I can help your family out of the trouble they are in. I can settle your father’s gambling debt, and I’ll give you enough money for your family to live comfortable for the next year.”

“And then what?” Teresa hisses, her narrowed eyes giving her a catlike appearance.

“Then you’ll have time to find a long-term solution.”

Teresa’s hands balled into fists, wrinkling her expensive gown. “You are asking me to do something from which you will benefit your whole life while you help me for just a year.”

I shook my head. “I don’t need to be a member of Hamburg’s society. It’s not a necessity. It’s an advantage. You, however, need the money, and I would be paying not just for a year, but for the debt that has been accumulating for the last ten years.”

Her eyes turned glassy, and her lip quivered. “I can’t do that. What will others think of me? Am I that repugnant that you don’t even want to consider marrying me? How can you condemn my father’s gambling when your parents were deranged alcoholics, and your sister is a bloodthirsty murderess?”

My temper rose in response to hers, but I shoved it down, focusing on my breathing. Fighting fire with fire would only burn everything down. “This has nothing to do with shame. It has to do with the fact that there is no attraction between us. I don’t want to be stuck in a loveless marriage like my parents were, and I don’t want you to be stuck in one either. We both deserve happiness.”

She let out a shrill laugh. “Right, but the difference is, you are going to get your happiness, and I won’t! What’s your biggest dilemma? Whether you should marry your maid or live with her in sin? I must marry for financial security. I don’t deserve to be stuck in a marriage with a man twice my age and be forced to leave all my friends behind!”

My Adam’s apple moved as I tried and failed to come up with a response.

“Yes, I bet you don’t have anything to say to that.” Pure disgust was written on Teresa’s face. “You didn’t think about that. And why would you? Your solution gives you everything you need.”

“It’s a fair deal,” I said, even though I was no longer 100 percent certain this was true.

Teresa finally released her dress and smoothed out the material. “What would I be expected to do to fulfill my end of the deal? How long am I supposed to accompany you to parties and put in a good word for you?”

“A few months, until everyone is used to me. If you give me two months of your time, you’ll still have ten more to find an eligible husband.”

“There are no eligible bachelors here, all of them have been taken off the market.”

I rubbed my temple, not appreciating Teresa’s attitude and knowing it was up to me to provide a solution if I wanted her to agree to the deal. “I could see if any of my merchant friends are planning to get married. They don’t have titles, but they do have money. Would that work?”

She hesitated, her practicality battling her high expectations. “Introduce them to me. We shall see if any of them are a good match.”

I nodded and extended my hand. She shook it and said, “If you breathe a word about my family’s situation or this talk to anyone, the deal is off.”

I left with a feeling of unease. Facilitating a marriage of convenience wasn’t what I had planned to do, but Teresa seemed convinced that only a rich groom could help her, and I knew there were merchants out there willing to take a poor wife if she came with a title. I had a hard time imagining that either would find happiness in that type of marriage, but who was I to judge other people’s choices.

DELILAH

Marie's wedding was everything I had expected it to be. The room was decorated in white and pale pink, and a superfluous number of roses were draped around the tables and pillars. Marie's layered gown was made from fine lace and featured intricate sleeves and a gorgeous high neckline.

I drank in Marie's wedding day, truly enjoying it, knowing how fleeting this happiness was. A part of me wanted to whisper in her ear, tell her to bottle up her feelings because soon everything would be over. The tarlike liquid weighed heavily in my pocket as I served the guests their refreshments while the happy couple smiled and danced to Jolie playing the piano. She must have been having a very good day to play this beautifully.

My bubble of contentedness shattered as Nolan walked in, Teresa by his side. Her body posture was rigid, and her smile was brittle compared to last time. Nolan fidgeted with his cufflinks, and deep frown lines were etched into his forehead. He didn't seem content, and yet, he was part of Hamburg's society while I had to serve them. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right. It had to end.

When Marie emptied her glass and returned to the dance floor, I struck. She had had enough time to enjoy her wedding. I replaced her champagne flute with a tainted one. Since Nadine's death, a maid was always by Marie's side. However, as I had discovered in a brief conversation earlier, she was told to watch the guests. Liam didn't suspect his staff. His trust would cost him dearly.

Everything went into slow motion. I continued making my rounds all the while watching Marie, not daring to lose her out of my sight until she drank the champagne.

Finally, Marie and Liam stopped dancing, and Nolan approached his former best friend slowly, his hands clutched behind his back, his expression hesitant. The awkwardness between the two men warmed me from the inside. Hamburg barely tolerated my brother; it was one step away from turning on him. I slid closer to the foursome, needing to hear their conversation.

"Congratulations, Liam. What a beautiful wedding," Nolan said.

Liam cracked a smile. "Thank you."

"No, thank you for inviting me."

"I'm glad you were able to come."

Nolan loosened his bowtie. "Would you like to go riding or hunting sometime after your honeymoon?"

Liam hesitated, and Marie nudged him. "Yes, that would be nice," he said in a cool tone.

Teresa joined them as Marie said, "I think it's a wonderful idea for you two to revive your friendship."

"Hear, hear," Teresa said, swinging her glass in her hand so that a few droplets spilled over. "To old and new friendships."

The three looked uncomfortable at her tipsiness but joined in. "To old and new friendships," they echoed and drank, all but Nolan, who put his untouched glass back down on the table.

"Bad luck," I whispered. Everyone knew you had to drink after a toast.

"Where are you planning to go on your honeymoon?" Nolan asked.

"I want to go to Paris and Nice." Marie's face took on a dreamy expression, and my chest contracted. Had I done something wrong? Had I not put in enough of the curse?

But then her hand began to tremble, and her tiny fingers wrapped around her throat.

"I can't breathe," she whispered, and I saw the exact moment it hit Nolan that Nadine's sudden demise was about to repeat itself with Marie. His face turned ashen, and he darted forward, but Liam was faster, catching his new wife as she collapsed in his arms.

The guest's attention swiveled toward the newlyweds. At first, everyone was silent; their mouths open wide, no words coming out. Then the volume

was switched back on.

"What's going on?" someone called.

"Did Marie collapse?" another guest asked.

Several voices trembled, "Will she be all right?"

I knew she wouldn't and judging from my brother's fallen face he knew it too. Liam, on the other hand, was in complete denial, yelling for help and saying that his new wife collapsed from exhaustion.

A part of me almost felt pity for Liam. Then I reminded myself that it was he who had returned home with my brother too early five years ago. If only Liam had entertained Nolan longer, Marie wouldn't have had to die. I could have excused my brother's cowardice and weakness if he hadn't turned me in to the police. By becoming a snitch, my brother had taken my parents' side. Even in their deaths, they were more important to him than I. My brother was on their side, which made him my enemy. He would never understand that they needed to die for me to live.

I shook myself, returning my focus to the present. No point dwelling on the past.

Nolan put his hand on Liam's shoulder, and a wave of ire crashed into me. I would be damned if the two men bonded over this tragedy. For a second, Liam allowed himself to be comforted, but then he remembered who was standing above him and pushed Nolan away. "What have you done?" Liam roared, the veins in his neck popping.

Nolan's face fell. "Nothing."

Liam cradled Marie's motionless body closer to his chest. "She was fine one moment, and now, she's not breathing, and her heart isn't beating. What have you done?"

"Nothing." Nolan's hands flew up in the air. Disgust roiled through my body. Just because Nolan's hands had no blood on them didn't make him innocent.

The crowd parted, and Liam's attention turned to the physician, who had just arrived. He lifted Marie to take her to another room, and Liam followed, but not before telling the policeman, "Question him," and pointing at Nolan.

Satisfied, I resumed my maidly duties and cleaned away the glasses and dishes, excited to see Hamburg coming undone.

Marie's wedding day was a victory, but the next day turned out even better. I headed into the city, hoping to catch a glimpse of Hamburg's mood.

From the shadows, I studied Nolan as he walked the streets in a daze, his eyes glassy, his posture stooped, and his gait heavy. Nobody talked to him. Both the nobility and peasants switched directions at the mere sight of him. Some whispered to their friends, while others made the sign of the cross.

Hamburg's reluctance about Bluebeard's return had transformed into full-blown fear. Part one of my mission was complete. Now, all I needed to do was mold their fear into rage.

NOLAN

When the police released me after extensive questioning, I wasn't eager to return home and trade one confinement for another. I needed to be outside where I could move and calm my restless mind. Nadine's death had been a blow to me and Hamburg. Marie's death was a devastating tragedy, one I wasn't sure any of us could ever recover from. How Liam's heart continued to beat, and his lungs continued to breathe without her was beyond me.

At first, their coupling had confused me, but after observing them over time, I had concluded they were perfect for each other. They complemented each other. Marie was softhearted and social while Liam was steadfast and calm.

To have Marie ripped away on their wedding day was the height of cruelty. Everything in my body screamed to go to Liam's home and comfort him, but the glare he had given me when I had tried to console him earlier held me back. Liam had stared at me, as if I had single-handedly destroyed his happiness. I had hoped that with time we could revive our friendship, but now, I realized that no matter what I did, he and Hamburg wouldn't allow me to forget my past and move on.

Through my fog of devastation and loss, my mind whirred with anxiety. Sudden deaths weren't unheard of, yet it was fishy that two young women in one town collapsed after drinking a glass of wine. That was too much of a coincidence and reeked of foul play.

I was certain the doctors and police wouldn't find poison in Marie's glass just as they hadn't found any in Nadine's. Which left only one cause

behind both girls' untimely deaths—dark magic.

Alone the idea of dark magic made me sick to my stomach. I had no knowledge about dark magic. Sure, I had heard of it, but I had never been interested in it. In fact, I had wanted to stay away from it as far as possible. But now, I could no longer deny that something malicious and magical was going on. For whatever reason, someone had cursed Marie. Twice. The first time, she had been spared, because inebriated Nadine had downed her champagne. The second time, Marie hadn't been as lucky.

But who had targeted Marie and why? Marie was a kind soul from one of Hamburg's most respected families. She was the sweetest person; only a jealous person would hurt her, hating her not for an action but for her mere existence. Had someone wanted Liam for themselves? No, I didn't think that was the cause. Otherwise, they wouldn't have waited until after the wedding to poison Marie. This almost felt like someone was out to get Liam. *Or you,* a scary voice in my head whispered. But who would want to hurt me? I had nothing. I was just starting to rebuild my life.

I could only think of one person who would be jealous, one person who had it worse than me—Delilah. But my sister was behind bars, wasn't she?

In the last five years, I hadn't checked up on her, choosing to erase her from my life as best as I could. I had been running from my past, but the time to face it had arrived. As I stared across the Elbe River, I decided to send a letter to Snake Island and check up on my sister. Perhaps I could even visit her and discuss what had happened on that godforsaken day five years ago that made her snap.

"Nolan?" I turned toward the sweet voice, and Jolie gave me a tentative smile. "How are you holding up?"

I shrugged and stared at the river. "It doesn't feel too good when people avoid you like the Black Plague."

She put her hand on my shoulder. "Right now, everyone is suspicious of everyone. It's normal after two girls dropped dead without any explanation."

"After they talked to me."

"Both were unfortunate incidents. You were in the wrong—"

"Place at the wrong time," I interrupted. "You already said that last time. And I could have believed it if it was a one off. But Marie's death was a replica of Nadine's. They both died after drinking a glass of wine and talking to me. Foul play was involved."

Jolie shook her head. “Neither the police nor the doctors found traces of poison in the glass or in the girls’ bodies.”

“We’re dealing with a killer who doesn’t mind using unconventional methods.”

She swallowed hard. “You think dark magic is involved? But how? In all the years I’ve lived here, I haven’t heard anyone talk about it, let alone use it.”

“There’s a guy on the outskirts of Hamburg—Manfred. For the right price, he can create anything.”

Worry lines formed on Jolie's forehead.

“I’ve never seen him, but Father mentioned his services often,” I said slowly.

“Did your father use them?”

I shook my head. “My father wasn’t a believer of magic, but he used the threat of a mind control spell to put my mother back in line when she misbehaved.”

The color drained from Jolie’s cheeks, making me realize just how awful Father’s behavior and abuse had been. After experiencing it daily growing up, I had become numb to its maliciousness.

“Did he ever go through with it?”

“No,” I said. “But if Father knew of Manfred, others who live here know about his abilities too.”

Jolie chewed her lip, and a desperate desire to press my mouth against hers overcame me. But I couldn’t. This area was too busy, and the last thing I needed was people seeing our kiss and spreading nasty rumors about Jolie being my mistress. I didn’t want anyone to know about us until I had received Uncle Greg’s blessing to make her my wife.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Jolie said after a long pause. “Why would anyone poison Nadine and Marie? I can’t imagine Marie having any enemies.”

“I think Marie and Nadine were collateral damage, and the curse was meant to hurt somebody else.”

“Liam?” When I didn’t respond, Jolie said more quietly, “You think you’re the target. But why? Have you wronged anyone?”

Delilah. But she was locked up. She had to be. I tightened my coat. “Maybe it’s the families of the girls that drowned.”

Jolie shook her head. “Both families attend church regularly, and I doubt they have the money or the ill will to go after you.”

“Me neither,” I admitted. It was time to confide my real suspicions, no matter how crazy they made me sound. “Delilah was very upset with me after I turned her in,” I began cautiously.

Confusion clouded Jolie’s beautiful hazel eyes. “She’s in prison, isn’t she?”

I shrugged. “People can curse other people while in prison. Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

“Why now?”

“Maybe she found out that I’m back in Hamburg.”

Jolie didn’t look convinced but didn’t protest my suspicions. “What are you going to do?”

“I need to write to her. See where her head is at. And I’ll make sure that no other woman in my vicinity dies. If I must pour each glass of wine myself, so be it.”

Jolie squeezed my hand. “That will make you look even more suspicious if the women do collapse. How about I pour the beverages for your guests?”

Gratefulness overcame me. Jolie had done so much for me, and she wanted to do more. “Thank you.”

She smiled and then straightened, excitement illuminating her features. “We shouldn’t just wait around for something to happen. We need to take things into our own hands. Let’s smoke out this person who’s trying to hurt you. Let’s throw a ball at the mansion and see who’s acting odd.”

I chuckled. “That’s a good idea, but you’re forgetting that everyone is giving me a wide berth.”

Jolie bit her lip again, and I itched to trace the curve of her mouth. To avoid temptation, I turned away from her and focused on her proposal. Hamburg wouldn’t come to visit me, a potential murderer, but Hamburg would come to support a good cause. Most didn’t care about the poor but enjoyed appearing charitable. I could hit two birds with one stone—help the less fortunate ones and find the person using dark magic. “The homeless.”

Jolie raised her eyebrows in question.

“I’ll throw a charity ball to collect clothes for the homeless. No nobleman or woman will want to appear heartless. They’ll all come.” Even if I didn’t gather any clues about who was behind the dark magic, the ball

wouldn’t be a waste since I would raise awareness for a good cause and aid those in need.

“That’s a great plan.”

Jolie’s smile melted my heart. If she only knew how much her approval meant to me. Worried that having the gala at my house would make the evildoer suspicious and overly cautious, I added, “We’ll throw a costume ball.” Hopefully, the safety of a mask would make the criminal extra daring and sloppy.

NOLAN

I released a breath of relief when I found Uncle Greg alone in his study. I knocked on the open door, and he glanced up.

"Nolan, come in!"

I sat down and interlaced my fingers, trying to come up with what to say.

"Jolie told me about the charity masquerade ball, what a wonderful idea."

Uncle always knew how to break the tension. While I wanted to talk about the ball and how we could help the homeless, I knew I wouldn't be able to focus on it completely until I asked Uncle about what was bothering me. "Do you know anything about dark magic?"

Uncle leaned back and gave me a long stare. "Does this have to do with Nadine and Marie's untimely deaths?"

"Yes. I don't believe they were accidental. I think somebody wanted them dead. I think dark magic was used and will be used again."

"I see. It seems as if your mind is already made up. What did you want to ask me?"

"There needs to be counter magic, light magic. Do you remember the large amethyst Mother purchased when I was young? She placed it in the foyer and for a while nothing bad happened in our house. Even Father grew…calmer."

"And then?" Uncle Greg's face was marred with pain. We never talked about my Father's problems, and I didn't want to drag up the past. Thus, I focused on the key points.

“Father was drunk one day and knocked the amethyst off the stand. It shattered into a thousand pieces. Since then the fights between my parents returned with a vengeance.”

“Your mother never tried to replace it?”

Nolan shook his head. “She said it was unique, imbued with magic. I thought it was just a saying, but now I think it was more than that.” When Greg didn’t reply, I asked, “Do you know where she got it from? Or who might have light magic?”

Uncle shook his head. “I’m afraid I don’t.”

Defeat settled over me like a heavy blanket, and then a memory came to me. Delilah, kicking and screaming as the police carted her off from the main square. A blind, elderly women approached me and foretold me that I would find happiness in the future. “I need to see the city’s psychic.”

Uncle didn’t look convinced but said, “I’ve heard many ladies speak highly of an elderly, fortune teller that lives at the end of Wolfgangsweg.”

I jumped up. “Thank you! I’ll go and see her now.”

I was by the door when Uncle said, “Nolan.” I turned around. “Good luck. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

With a nod, I left, wondering if I knew what exactly I was looking for.

It wasn’t hard to find the apartment of the fortune teller. The first person I asked told me the elderly woman lived on the top floor. I walked up the rickety staircase and knocked on the wooden door, the smell of incense enveloping me.

“Come in,” a voice croaked, and I found it hard to breath. I had only heard this voice once five years ago, despite this, it felt as if it had only been yesterday. I pushed down the cold metal handle and entered a small room illuminated with candlelight. The furniture was made of simple wood and doilies lined the table where a woman with long gray hair sat, her eyes translucent but alert, giving the impression she could see everything even without having her sight.

“I’ve come to seek your counsel.” My voice came out hoarse, and I lowered myself into the chair opposite from the woman.

She nodded. “I wondered when you would come, Nolan.”

I flinched at her knowing my name.

“It’s happening again, isn’t it?”

“What?” I asked cautiously.

She shook her head and shuffled the deck of cards in front of her. “Don’t play coy. There’s no time left for that. The deaths. You came to me because death surrounds you.”

I swallowed hard. “The doctors ruled two recent passings as accidents, but I think dark magic is involved. A curse.”

“Indeed.”

I took a deep breath, hating that she was confirming my worst fears, even though that’s what I had hoped she would do when I came here. “I need help. Something I can use to protect the…” I searched for the right word. “…future victims.”

“You won’t be able to protect them because you don’t know who they are. But you can protect yourself.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but she held up her hand, stopping me.

“Only by taking care of yourself first, will you have a chance to take care of the others.”

“How do I do that?”

She gave me a weak smile. “I’m not a witch. I can’t give you a spell, but I can give you a stone of protection.”

“An amethyst.”

She stood, opened a wooden cabinet behind herself, and pulled out a lilac quartz the size of a small vase, then put it on the table.

“Thank you.” I produced a bag of coins and pushed it over to her.

“It’s too much,” she said after weighing the coin bag.

“I insist.”

“Very well. I thank you for your generosity.”

I took the amethyst and was about to rise, but the psychic’s words stopped me in my tracks. “You haven’t asked how the protection works.”

I chewed on my lip. “I thought it starts working once I put it in my home.” Normally, I wasn’t one to believe in such nebulous explanations, but I had witnessed firsthand the amethyst’s power in action. It had brought peace and serenity to my unstable home life.

“You need to carry it on you at all times. It won’t stop the curse, but it will make you more resistant to dark magic. It will give you a barrier. A chance to win.”

The stone was at least ten pounds, there was no way I could always carry it on me. It would impede me, and it would be too obvious. Whoever

was trying to harm me would easily guess they needed to destroy the quartz. “That’s impractical.”

The psychic smiled wrily. “Shape it into something practical.”

I examined the stone. I supposed I could break a chunk of and make it into a necklace. “It won’t lose its power if I break it into pieces?”

“No, it’s power will hold as long as it’s on you.”

I swallowed hard, wondering if my parents would still be alive, if we hadn’t thrown away the broken amethyst but kept it in the house. “I could make a necklace or an armband out of it.”

The fortune teller shook her head. “That’s not enough.”

“What if I do both and create rings as well?” Her response was silence. “What if I do multiples of those?” Still silence. Dammit, she wasn’t going to give me the answer. Think, Nolan, think. “What if I sew it into my clothes?”

She nodded. “That’s better. Make sure it covers as much of your body as possible.”

“Like armor.” I had to wear amethyst armor.

A nearby church bell rang, and the psychic’s lips pressed together. “Be on your way now, Nolan. You have work to do. Best if you finish it before your ball.”

“How did you—”

She motioned to the door. “Go. It isn’t wise to let anyone see you here.”

Any further questions I had perished on my tongue. As I hurried out the door, I considered what the fortune teller had told me. I was in danger. I needed to protect myself to take care of the future victims, and I had to do it in a discreet manner because someone was watching me.

JOLIE

"Good morning." I put the breakfast tray in front of Nolan and his uncle.

"Thank you," they chorused, and Greg asked, "What are you up to today, Jolie?"

I smiled widely. "If you don't have any urgent tasks for me, I would like to go into the city and purchase a few of the items we'll need for the ball."

Greg beamed. "Yes, of course. I'm so glad Nolan and you decided to host a charity ball. Hamburg's nobility is long overdue to give back to the community." Greg looked from me to Nolan, and I tensed. How much did Greg know about what was going on between me and his nephew?

As if reading my thoughts, Nolan cleared his throat and said, "I've told Uncle that we have feelings for each other and are exploring our relationship."

I gulped and turned my worried gaze to Greg. He gave me a warm smile. "You have my blessing."

"But, I'm not—"

He held up a hand. "I want Nolan to be happy and find his place in Hamburg's society, and I think he can do both with your support."

"Thank you," I whispered.

"However, I think you should wait for everything to calm down and be sure of your feelings before you make your relationship public."

I nodded in agreement.

"Do you need help in the city?" Nolan asked.

“I got it.” I needed some alone time to process what it meant that Nolan had confided in his uncle and that Greg had given us his blessing. “I shall see you in the evening,” I said, having previously agreed with the other maid that she would cover my afternoon duties.

I exited the study and waved goodbye to Tabetha who was in the garden and waved back. Since she had taken me to spy on Teresa, she had relaxed her campaign against Nolan. Clearly, she had decided that me seeing the ferociousness with which Teresa pursued Nolan would be enough for me to declare the situation hopeless.

What Tabetha didn’t know was that Nolan had made a deal with Teresa —he would give her the money she needed, and she would help him reenter Hamburg’s society without marrying her. I had doubted Teresa would agree to this arrangement, but somehow Nolan had convinced her. Now, that she knew where he stood, Nolan was free to marry me one day. *Do you really think he wants to marry you?* my critical voice asked. *He says he won’t sneak around with you, and he won’t make you his mistress, but he never said he would marry you.*

I pushed away the voice. Marriage wasn’t my goal. I didn’t need a ring or a piece of paper to finalize Nolan’s commitment. All I wanted was for our relationship to be in the open so that we didn’t need to hide.

True to my word, I planned to do some shopping in the city center; however, first, I was going to find Manfred. I had brought up the idea of going to him to Nolan, but he had been against this, not wanting to get involved with dark magic. I had no plan to get involved with dark magic either, but I had the feeling that with a bit of persuasion and perhaps a few gold coins, Manfred would give up the name or at least the physical description of the person who had wanted to curse Nolan.

Not having any clue where to start looking for Manfred, I had asked Tabetha about him. She had suggested I talk to her brother. Since Paul disapproved of me being involved in any way with Nolan, I needed to polish my acting skills and pretend curiosity was the driving force behind my interest and not concern for Nolan and potential future victims. Perhaps I should drop Nadine’s name in our conversation. My stomach cramped, and I felt guilt for using the dead for my plan. But a little white lie wouldn’t hurt anyone and was worth it if I could save lives.

Plastering a big smile on my face, I entered the tailoring store.

Paul tore his attention away from pinning a crimson fabric to the mannequin. “Jolie! What brings you here?” His nose crinkled. “Please don’t tell me Nolan needs more clothes already.”

“No, it’s nothing like that.” I kept my tone as light as possible. “I just wanted to check up on my friend and see what he’s up to. Nothing wrong with that, is there?”

Paul pulled me into a hug and ruffled my hair.

I began examining his creations, pretending to be interested in the latest fashions. “Anything interesting going on?” I asked casually. “I’ve been so swamped with the charity ball preparations, I barely get to leave the house.”

Paul groaned. Apparently, even an indirect reminder of Nolan was too much. “Nothing really, everybody is still down about Marie’s death.” He shook his head. “What a tragedy.”

“Absolutely devastating.” I turned my gaze back on Paul, not wanting to miss his reaction to my next statement. “Did you know that right before her death, Nadine had been talking about dark magic and a guy named Manfred?”

Paul’s eyebrows knitted together. “Nadine’s talkative nature allowed her to meet all kinds of people. But Manfred is dangerous. It’s best not to get involved with him.”

I leaned on the counter and put my face in my hands. “Is that so? Have you ever met him?”

Paul crossed his arms. “No, I haven’t. But I’ve once walked past his place and almost ran into him as he was leaving.”

“How do you know it was him?”

Paul snorted. “Manfred is the only guy who keeps his hair long, wears dresses, and is decked out in a bunch of jewelry.”

So, he was easy to spot. Excellent. Now, all I needed was an address. “Nadine said he lives on the outskirts of the city. What were you doing there?”

Paul’s lips thinned at my question, and I knew immediately I had asked the wrong one. Whatever Paul has been doing in the neighborhood, he didn’t want to discuss it.

“Why the sudden interest?” His tone was sharp.

I averted my gaze, afraid he would know I was lying if I he saw my eyes. “I was just curious. If there’s a dark, powerful magician in our city, I would like to avoid him.” Pretending to shiver, I hugged myself. “I would

feel much safer if I knew where Manfred lived, so that I would never stumble on that area by mistake."

Paul's face softened, and a jab of guilt at tricking him went through me. It was quickly overridden by excitement as he said, "Stay away from the Moorfleeter Deich area."

"Thank you." I glanced at the wooden cuckoo clock behind him and gasped. "Look at the time! I better get going if I want to get all my chores done before sundown."

Paul opened the door for me. "Take care of yourself, Jolie."

"Will do," I whispered, wondering if he sensed that I was playing with fire.

As I headed out of the city, the mansions and grand buildings gave way to simpler houses and finally to ones with rusty doors and peeling paint. The air too changed from perfume-heavy to a mixture of sweat, urine, and vomit.

A man swayed toward me. Normally, I avoided drunks, but now, I walked toward him. "Excuse me, could you tell me where Manfred lives?"

The man rubbed his fingers together, and I handed him a coin. He pointed at a narrow alley and slurred, "Sixth house."

I nodded my thanks and hurried away, eager to get out of this part of town.

Manfred's abode was a two-story, butter-colored house. As with the other houses on the street, its paint was peeling, and the door handle was rusty. I was about to go to the door when a blonde woman floated out of it. Her hair shone like spun gold, and her slender and tall figure was hugged by a crimson cloak. When her dark gaze fell on me, a shiver ran through me, and I quickly hurried past Manfred's house. It was only after a good minute of walking that I dared to glance back. The icy beauty was gone. I exhaled with relief, and then another fear nestled in my stomach. The woman fit the description of the witch in the Black Forest. Was that her? If so, Manfred was much more dangerous than I had thought.

Everything inside of me screamed to turn around, but I pushed my misgivings away. I would do this for Nolan. I opened the door to Manfred's house and entered the dark corridor, which had one staircase leading up and one leading down. My gut told me to descend, so that's what I did, goose bumps rising all over my body with each step I took.

At the end of the staircase was a heavy iron door. I looked for a door knob but didn't find one and pushing against the door didn't work. Following my instinct, I tapped every inch of the iron. I was about to give up when a piece of iron slid backward and revealed a silver key.

My heart hammered loudly in the silence as I unlocked the door and stepped into the cellar.

A man was sitting on a counter, sharpening his knife. His white hair was in a ponytail, and when he glanced up, milky eyes met mine. His wrinkle free face made me guess he was in his early twenties. A daffodil-yellow dress wrapped around his lanky body while silver bracelets and necklaces provided the finishing touches to his outfit.

"Don't just stand there, girl. Come closer," he said.

Even though everything inside of me demanded that I leave, I stepped forward.

"What did you come here for? Certainly not to gawk at me, even though I am pretty sight if I say so myself." A melodic laugh flowed from his cherry-red mouth. "Did you need a love spell?" He shook his head. "No, you're too pretty for that. Perhaps a spell to ward off evil, or to guarantee that your true love will find you?"

I took a deep breath, not letting him intimidate me. "I'm here to find out who came to you to curse Nolan Heinberg."

He let out a prolonged tinkling laugh. "Shouldn't Nolan himself be here instead of sending a fair maiden?"

I didn't reply, not wanting to inadvertently give away the nature of my relationship with Nolan.

Manfred's face turned somber. "I don't betray my customers, but in this case, I believe I can provide some answers to your questions to even the playfield. However, information doesn't come for free; you'll have to pay."

"That's not a problem." I pulled out a bag of coins that held the money I had been saving up for the last two years. It was meant to help me transition when I gathered courage to try something besides being a maid, but with Nolan being cursed, I had decided to spend the money to rescue him and my city. I could wait to become a pianist, but I wouldn't forgive myself if another maiden died when I could've prevented her death.

Manfred didn't even look at my bag of coins. "I don't want your gold. I'm much more interested in other types of payment, especially from a soul as honest and pure as yours."

JOLIE

I willed my lips not to tremble as I asked, “What do you want from me?”

Maliciousness flashed in Manfred’s eyes. “What is the most precious thing you have that isn’t a possession? And don’t even think about lying. I’ll know.”

Confusion roiled through me. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

Manfred let out a tinkling laugh. “Don’t worry, you’re ahead of most people who think that their earthly possessions are the be all. They don’t even know how important what they take for granted is until it’s lost forever.”

Understanding flashed through me. “Like health?”

Manfred clapped his hands. “Bravo! Most people are smart enough not to give up their health, so I settle for shaving off years of their lives.”

I clasped my hands together. I might not be able to hide my quivering any longer, but I wanted to at least minimize it. “You want to shorten my life span?”

Manfred tilted his head. “Interesting, how attached you are to your life. People your age normally don’t understand the value of living a long life. They don’t even consider that their life might be over in five years and that by promising me a few years, they’re going to die within a week, making the spell they had asked for useless to them.”

“You don’t tell them that?” My outrage earned me a glare, and I quickly changed course since fanning Manfred’s displeasure would do nothing for me. “Is that what you want? How many years?” I had no clue when I was supposed to die, and the idea that I might give Manfred the final years of

my life terrified me, but I reasoned he wouldn't have highlighted that tidbit if it applied to me.

To my surprise, Manfred shook his head. "I've accumulated plenty of years this week. I don't need any more. Unfortunately, most people's prized possession is their life. But you have much more to offer."

I swallowed hard as I speculated what he wanted. "I play the piano. It brings me and others a lot of joy. Is that what you want to take from me?"

Manfred jumped off the counter and circled me like a wolf would a deer. "How brave of you to offer your passion, the talent you hope to turn into your livelihood." My palms grew clammy, and he grabbed my chin, his eerie milky eyes staring deep inside my soul. "Yes, I know this about you, and I know much more." He let go of me and leaned back against the counter. Tapping his chin with his index finger, he said, "I would have gone for your piano abilities had you come here to obtain something for yourself. It would only be fair to take something from you when giving you something. But you're not here for yourself. You're here out of altruistic reasons—to protect the city of Hamburg and Nolan Bluebeard."

My breathing stopped. What if Manfred took Nolan away from me?

As if reading my thoughts, Manfred laughed. "Don't worry, I won't keep you and your lover apart. What's the fun in the game if not all players get to participate?" In a flash, he was in front of me and shoved his finger against my chest. "Because make no mistake, my dear, you are a key player."

Unable to take the tension any longer, I whispered, "Tell me what you want."

Manfred's eyes sparked. "You can keep Nolan and your piano playing. But you won't be able to stand his touch. It will burn you, hurt you."

"What?" A part of me wanted to ask how that was relevant to the curse, but another part of me understood. Manfred wanted my relationship with Nolan to be compromised, have mistrust sprout between us.

I wanted to cry out at the unfairness of this deal. Did Manfred really think he needed to put a roadblock in my and Nolan's path when there were so many already? Swallowing my frustration, I focused on the positive aspect—I could still be near Nolan and help him. "Anything else I need to know?"

Manfred tucked one of my hair strands behind my ear. "Don't look so dejected, fair maiden. You will be able to kiss and touch your Nolan if the

curse is broken. However, if you fail to stop the curse, you'll never be able to hold his hand."

I couldn't dwell on the later possibility. I couldn't allow fear to overtake me. "How do I know if the curse is about to be fulfilled or not?"

Manfred's finger moved to my temple, which he tapped several times, and I really wished he would stop being so touchy, but I didn't dare to voice my misgivings, afraid that offending him would lead to worse deal conditions for me.

"The curse is fulfilled when the seventh life is eradicated. Included in this number are the two lives that were taken five years ago."

"Three more girls are supposed to die." Horror engulfed me. I had expected the killer to strike again but to know he planned to claim three more lives was devastating.

Manfred pulled out a dagger, and my stomach knotted. "That's all I'm going to tell you about the curse before you agree to the proposed deal." He handed me a scroll, which was a contract outlining what we had discussed. "Sign it in blood, and I will tell you who ordered the curse and why. Be aware that you won't be able to tell anyone, confirm, or deny who is behind the curse. You're going to be the only one with the knowledge."

Another caveat. My insides screamed that this was a very bad idea, but what other option did I have? I needed to do everything I could to protect Nolan and save three innocent girls.

After I read through the contract and didn't find any more concerning clauses, I held out my hand to Manfred. He pricked my finger with a blade and squeezed my droplets of blood into an ink bottle. With a raven feather, I signed the contract using my blood as ink.

I expected a sudden and dramatic change that symbolized the contract snapping into place, but all I felt was my resolve to stop the curse harden. I wouldn't lose what Nolan and I had. Manfred wouldn't destroy us.

I shook myself, taken aback by the intensity of my thoughts. Was that the curse? Or was I changing all on my own?

"Tell me, who cursed Nolan." My voice sounded deeper and firmer than usual.

"Delilah Heinberg."

"Nolan's sister is in prison."

Manfred looked like a cat that had ravished a bowl of cream. "Correction: she was in prison. She's free now, roaming the streets of

Hamburg and setting the Bluebeard Curse in motion."

"What does she look like?"

Manfred shook his head. "You can obtain this information from anyone in Hamburg. She hasn't changed much in the last five years. Well, at least not to you." He snickered.

I didn't find his answer amusing. "You promised me her name and a physical description."

"I'll make it up to you." He handed me two yellow vials.

"What is that? I won't poison anyone. I want Delilah to be brought to justice, not murder her."

"Relax. This is a knockout liquid. It will come in handy when you are cornered. Use it wisely. Each bottle can only be used once."

"Why are you helping me?"

"Because everything is stacked against you, and I enjoy a bit of intrigue. Right now, you have a one percent chance of winning. My help will bring it up to a ten percent chance and make it much more exciting to watch how all of this will play out."

"Thank you." Sarcasm and gratitude amalgamated within me. I headed for the door before he could change his mind and demand I give him something in return for the vials. My hand hovered above the door handle when an invisible force pulled my head back. "Is there something else I need to know?"

Manfred twirled his ponytail. "Yes, you are on Delilah's black list. Since you might be the next victim, I highly recommend you put all your focus into breaking the curse."

Normally, panic would have seized me at such an admission; instead, deadly calm overcame me. Somehow, I had already known that I had become part of the curse when Nolan had stepped into my life.

Wondering how I could break the curse, I barely paid attention to my surroundings as I headed back toward Hamburg's city center, intending to make at least a few purchases for the ball.

To save some time, I cut through a side ally. I was almost at the end of it when a girl appeared. Not just any girl, but Teresa. I swallowed hard, and my heartbeat picked up speed. *Stay calm. You have nothing to fear. Teresa and Nolan have reached an agreement, and he hasn't breathed a word about you to her.* Then why was my body screaming at me to either fight or run?

Teresa's next words justified my unease. "There she is, the little, filthy, talentless harlot."

"Did you destroy my room?" I half-gasped, half accused.

"No, but I should have. It's a pity you don't understand warnings. You deserved what happened to you and what's about to happen." All traces of the sweet socialite vanished from her face to be replaced by a ruthless ugliness.

"How dare you?" I widened my stance and pushed my shoulders back. I wasn't sure whether Manfred was responsible for my new bravery, or if it was the result from how often I had ventured outside my comfort zone in the last few weeks.

"Careful what you say next. You're all alone. Not much you can do without your Bluebeard." Teresa waved a hand, and two servants appeared behind her. The women rolled up their sleeves as they advanced toward me, but I refused to cower.

"What do you want?" Every fiber in my body tensed, standing at attention. It was fight or flight time, and I had no intention to run away.

"Teach you a lesson. You need to back off from what's mine," Teresa purred.

"If you're speaking about Nolan, he has never been yours. Even if he hadn't met me, he wouldn't have chosen you."

The servant close to me slapped me across the face. Agony exploded in my cheek; throbbing wildly, it released something within me. Before I knew it, my hands were on the servant's shoulders, shoving her back hard. Who was this new person?

"Help her!" Teresa shrieked, and the second servant jerked so hard on my hair, I was certain she had yanked out a chunk. Her other friend kicked me behind the knee, and I yowled. I might have courage, but it was unlikely I would win a fight against two. Still, I wouldn't give Teresa the satisfaction of seeing me humiliated. I darted for her, but before I could reach her, a fist pummeled me in the side. The pain was so extreme, I collapsed. When I managed to twist my head and glance up, the servant girls were looming above me, grinning. I expected them to back off now that I was defeated, but Teresa said, "Let's make sure she won't forget this."

Two sets of feet kicked me, pounding bruises into my body. Were they planning to kill me? I had to stop them. I wouldn't allow this to be the end of my story. Remembering the yellow potion in my pocket, I pulled it out

and prayed Manfred hadn't lied to me. I threw the potion in a circular movement, ensuring the drops hit the two servants and Teresa. The kicking stopped immediately, and then all three collapsed.

I rose on trembling legs and wiped away the blood running down my temple. My coat was ruined, and I sported a limp and several bruises, but I was still alive and conscious, the latter not something my opponents could brag about.

Exhaling slowly, I hobbled into the direction of home, trying not to think what Delilah, who had spent five years in prison, had up her sleeve when Teresa, the sweet socialite, had turned out to be a vicious snake.

DELILAH

I didn't like how everything was unfolding, not one bit. I guess I should have planned better and realized that two deaths in a row would put a serious damper on Hamburg's social agenda. How on earth could I slip the curse to my victims if they didn't go out and interact with Nolan?

Sure, I could find a way to add a drop of the curse to Teresa's meal or drink in his presence without a party, but that would cut the effectiveness and drama. Death was only half of the equation. I needed people to see how helpless Teresa was as her body convulsed. I needed them to see that the last person talking to her was my brother. They needed to fully accept that Bluebeard was cursed.

Waiting had never been one of my strong suits, and after hearing earlier today that the next ball would be arranged by none other than my brother, I knew I needed to sneak into the event even if it was risky.

Hosting a ball was so out of character for Nolan that I had to wonder whether it was a trap. I knew it hadn't been Teresa's suggestions since I hadn't heard her bragging about it to her friends. This left only one other influencer—Jolie.

I didn't like the scenario of Jolie convincing my brother at all. I wanted her to stay far away from Nolan. This girl was trouble. She ignored rules and had no respect for social order. How dare she attempt to be more than Nolan's mistress and leave her maid role to become a pianist? Who did she think she was? Perhaps I shouldn't leave her for the end but take her out next time.

Who cared about the order of the deaths anyway? What mattered weren't the specifics, but making Nolan look guilty. It was of the uttermost importance that his party ended in a death, adding credibility to the rumor that he was cursed.

Deciding that I was going to Nolan's masquerade ball, I considered the best way to sneak in. Even with Manfred's spells cloaking me, I was afraid that dressing as a noble would take it too far and lead to someone recognizing me. Thus, I settled on trying to gain entry to the party as a maid.

However, my efforts to be hired failed. Each time I inquired about a temporary position I was sent away with a resounding no. It was customary to hire additional help before a big event. Nolan not doing so increased my suspicion that he knew something was going on. Could my brother really be on to me? Nolan had always kept his worries under a tight lock. If he had confided in anyone at all, it was probably Jolie. Unfortunately, she wasn't a gossip queen like Nadine. I would need to gain Jolie's trust, something I didn't have the time or patience for.

Plus, while she hadn't so far realized who I was, I couldn't risk her finding an old painting of me and connecting the dots. Obtaining information from her as Desiree was not an option. I needed to use the cloaking spell Manfred had given me and turn into another person, one that Jolie trusted.

I considered who fitted the bill and came up with the redheaded girl—Tabetha, the gardener. Should I turn into her to fool Jolie? Or should I wait? After all, the cloaking spell could be used only once for one day, and I might need it later.

As my mind swirled with different scenarios, I came upon a sight so strange, I had to look twice to make sure I could trust my eyes. Teresa was sitting on the cobblestone street, rubbing her temples, a dazed expression on her face.

I rushed over to her. "Lady Teresa, are you all right? What happened?"

She took my outstretched hand and allowed me to pull her up, then glanced around, her confusion slowly being replaced with wrath. "I can't believe they left me here. What kind of servants do that?"

Those who didn't get paid in a timely manner. I didn't voice my suspicions. Instead, I asked, "Who did this to you?"

"Stupid maid. Is she your friend?"

I tilted my head. “Who are you talking about?”

“Jolie. The wench who’s trying to ruin everything.”

I nodded sympathetically. “She’s horrible. Absolutely arrogant to us other servants. She thinks she’s better than us.” I dropped my voice to a whisper. “Sometimes I think she thinks she’s better than the nobility.”

Teresa sneered. “She’s despicable and needs to be locked up.”

Her words sent a rush of fear through me, and I reprimanded myself. I couldn’t always panic when I heard words related to prison. In a calm tone, I said, “I still don’t understand what she did to you. Do you want to call the police?” It was a ballsy move, but a necessary one.

Teresa stalled, straightening her dress, and I knew she did not want to call the police. The air whooshed out of my lungs as I relaxed.

“It’s fine.” She made as if to leave, and I hurried before I missed my chance.

“Perhaps we could help each other. It seems like Jolie committed a crime against you. She’s committed a crime against me too. I don’t want to see her go unpunished. It’s not right.”

Teresa studied me. “What did she do to you?”

“She ruined my chances to be with Paul.” The tailor’s name had been the first one to pop into my head and judging by Teresa’s nod she believed my lie.

“She’s two-faced. Always pretending to be so caring, and yet, somehow, I have no recollection of what she did to me.” Teresa massaged the back of her head.

This time, I didn’t have to fake a rise of my eyebrows, genuinely confused by how Jolie had overpowered Teresa and her servants. “I won’t be able to help you if you don’t tell me what happened.”

Teresa sighed. “I told her to back off from nobility. My girls were here for mental support.”

And for physical support, I added silently, having spotted the blood on the ground earlier.

“Anyhow, things got out of hand, and before I knew it, she pulled out a yellow bottle and threw its contents at us. I don’t remember the rest, but whatever the contents were, they must have made me unconscious.”

“Dark magic,” I whispered. How had Jolie obtained it? Did she know about me? No, she couldn’t, right? I gritted my teeth. Darn Manfred. But even if he had told her what I was up to, there was no way she could stop

me. One gullible, lovesick maid wasn't a threat. An inconvenience perhaps, but not a threat.

My words must've finally sunk in because Teresa gasped. "Oh, my goodness! You think she used dark magic against me? How did she get it?"

I gritted my teeth, certain it had come from Manfred. I wanted to put my hands around his neck and throttle him. Patience, I needed patience. Once the Bluebeard Curse was complete, I could hire someone to bring Manfred to me. He would be searched for potions and weapons, and then when he had no protection on him, I would show him my rage.

"I wonder what else Jolie has." Teresa's words brought me back to the present.

Good question. One I couldn't answer without Teresa's help. Giving her a sweet smile, I asked, "Are you going to Nolan's ball?"

"Of course. A worthless maid with black magic won't stop me." Teresa's eyelid jerked, betraying her nonchalant words.

"How about I come with you? I promise I will be more reliable than your friends. I want Jolie gone just as badly as you do, and I'm not afraid of getting my hands dirty."

Teresa gave me a once-over. "What's your price?"

Even if I hadn't known about her family's financial trouble, I wouldn't have asked for money. I would have plenty of that myself once Nolan was out of the picture. "Nothing. Going to the ball is plenty. I want to show Jolie that she isn't the only maid who can step out of her role. If you allow me to come as your entourage, my standing would be that much higher than hers."

My statement must have hit a nerve with Teresa because she smiled in a self-satisfied way. "You're going to be by my side the whole night?"

"Absolutely. I'm going to ensure you never have need for anything."

"It's going to be a costume ball. I will be Red Riding Hood. We'll need a costume for you too."

I jumped at the opportunity. "I'll be the big bad wolf. I'll take care of the costume." This way I could enter the party with my whole face hidden.

"Very well. I hope we both get what we want."

"I'm sure we will." I smiled. Now, that I had incognito access to Nolan's ball, the fun could begin.

NOLAN

I sighed and rubbed my tired eyes. With Teresa and her servants attacking Jolie, I needed to figure out more than ever how to integrate the amethyst stone into clothing. At first, I had considered commissioning a tailor to sew the amethyst into a fabric but decided against it. Yes, it might be easier and quicker to let a professional do it. However, I wasn't sure who I could trust in the city. Gossip seemed to travel at the speed of a forest fire, and the last thing I needed was for whoever was targeting me—I still hoped it wasn't Delilah—to know what I was up to.

Thus, I had broken the amethyst into tiny pieces, then created a hole in each piece so that it could go on a thread. I tried adding the stones to a knitted sweater, but soon discovered that the threads were too heavy, hanging down too low. Wool wasn't strong enough and unsuitable as armor. What I needed was a chainmail shirt, but where would I obtain that? None of the tailors in the city made battlefield clothes, and even if they did, chainmail had long fallen out of fashion and was considered medieval. It appeared that I had to create the chainmail from scratch. With both Jolie and I needing one, I purchased one mile of metal wire and began cutting out individual rings, shaping them with needle nose pliers.

Since I've never done anything like this before and with the additional challenge of adding amethysts into the metal rings, I spent countless hours bent over my project, making little progress. Before I knew it, the day of the masquerade charity ball had arrived.

I put away the unfinished shirts and went downstairs. First, I ensured the donation corner in the foyer was set up with several empty chests and a

rack for cloth hangers. Next to it stood the large trunk of materials I was donating to the homeless charity. Satisfied with the preparations, I wrote a letter to the charity head and attached to it a bag of gold coins to pay a tailor to transform the materials into clothes and perform alterations on the donated garments.

Finally, I checked on Jolie who was preparing the ballroom, straightening the tablecloths and putting down the silverware.

Me observing her from the door frame didn't go unnoticed, and she gave me a half-smile, half-glare. "I can't focus with you hovering over me, Nolan."

"I can't think straight when I don't know whether you're safe or not." I walked toward her, needing to breath in her honey scent.

She rolled my eyes. "Teresa and her servants jumped me in an alley. I'm perfectly safe here in the ballroom."

"How can you say that? Only recently your room was destroyed."

She shrugged nonchalantly, and I wanted to shake her. Didn't she understand how serious the situation was? A part of me hoped that it was Teresa and her goons that had destroyed Jolie's room, at least they didn't have dark magic. But what if the person who had killed Nadine and Marie was also after Jolie? What if they knew that Jolie was helping me? I needed to keep Jolie safe. Right then and there, I swore to myself that if any more odd activity occurred, I would send her away. My chest ached just thinking about it, but Jolie's well-being came before my feelings.

"What does your sister look like?" Jolie asked suddenly, and I froze. Did she think Delilah had vandalized her room? Did she think Delilah would target her next? I hoped the response from Snake Island would arrive soon. Without knowing whether my sister was still there or if she had somehow escaped, I couldn't plan and prepare properly.

"Nolan?" Jolie gave me an impatient look, and I realized I had never answered her question.

"Why do you want to know?" I ran a hand through my hair. "Do you think you might've seen her?"

"Because if your sister's involved in...." Jolie's voice broke off, and her face marred with pain.

"What is it?" I put my hand on her shoulder, and she flinched, as if I had burned her. She'd been acting like this a lot lately. It worried me. Was the stress all becoming too much? Or did Jolie no longer want to be near me?

Was she just helping me out of pity? It was too painful to consider this possibility, so I said to distract myself, “Delilah was pretty. Beautiful even. But she had a cold beauty, nothing like yours.”

Jolie reached out, then retracted her hand.

I tried not to read too much into her strange behavior. “Delilah had blonde curls and amber eyes,” I continued.

Jolie stiffened. “We’ll have to be vigilant about our guests today.”

I nodded. “It would be much easier if we knew who the next victim was. Then we could focus on her. Unfortunately, we don’t have a pattern. All we know was that Marie was the intended victim, and Nadine died accidentally after drinking from Marie’s glass.”

“You were fond of Marie. Somebody is trying to hurt you.” Jolie’s forehead scrunched up, as if she had a migraine attack.

“Are you all right?”

She waved me off. “I’m fine.”

I swallowed my annoyance. Why wasn’t she letting me in? Where had the trust between us gone?

“I think Marie was killed because it was destructive to your reputation. The perpetrator knew her death would further strain your friendship with Liam.”

I snorted. “Understatement of the year. Liam’s expression was full of accusation, as if I had killed Marie.”

“That’s exactly what your enemy wants.”

Everyone in Hamburg knew I had used to court Marie. Even though my pain would never match Liam’s, it was hard to lose someone I had cared about. “If my enemy is going after those I cherish…” My hands acted of their own accord, pulling Jolie closer. “I won’t allow you to become the next victim.”

She freed herself from my hug, and agony shot through me. What had changed? Did she blame me for the curse, thinking I had brought it on myself?

“I won’t become the next victim. Now, that the killer has Hamburg’s attention, it makes more sense to go after noblewomen. Your enemy seeks first and foremost to destroy your reputation.”

Her words set off the wheels in my head. “Teresa.” My hands fisted. “I’ll watch her. But you need to stay far away from her after what she and her servants did to you.”

“She won’t harm me at the party.”

I sighed loudly. “It’s unlikely, but I still want you to be careful. Can you please stay away from her for my sake?” I noticed the tremble in her hand, and almost reached for her but stopped myself in the last second. “You don’t look well. You should lay down. We have enough staff. We’ll manage without you.”

“I’m fine,” she huffed, and before I could argue, she left the room.

Perhaps Jolie was fine. Perhaps it was simply my company she couldn’t stand any longer.

JOLIE

As I hurried away from Nolan, a crippling agony spread through my body, turning my vision white for a moment. I needed to get away from him before I passed out. The combination of his touches and me trying to talk about Delilah made me feel like was being roasted on the inside, courtesy of Manfred's contract.

Slipping out a side entrance, I gulped down the fresh evening air. I hated how broken Nolan looked every time I put up a barrier between us. I hated that I couldn't tell him why I was acting so strange. And yet, there wasn't anything I could do. I had to harden myself so that Manfred's contract didn't punish me with more physical ailments, which I couldn't afford if I wanted to be of any help to Nolan.

Once the pain subsided, I analyzed my talk with Nolan, particularly his description of Delilah. Dark eyes and light hair—an uncommon combination. I had only seen one girl who fit that description. The first time, she had asked me for directions to the beer garden; the second time, she had worked for Liam's family as a maid under the name Desiree. Those who remembered Delilah said she was haughty, which made it hard to imagine that she would work as a maid. But if she was desperate for revenge, it was possible she had accepted a position as a maid to gain the opportunity to poison Nadine and Marie with magic.

What was Delilah's endgame? She had been in prison for five years, and thus, suffered for a prolonged time. I guessed she wanted Nolan to suffer too. Not that I thought she would stop at that. She wanted to destroy him. She had purchased dark magic that hurt her brother and made him look

guilty. I had the bad feeling she wanted to rile up the town into killing him or push him to commit suicide. Not that I would allow that to happen.

Since sitting behind the piano didn't allow me to mingle and observe the guests, Nolan had hired a string quartet. Free to resume my maid role, I tended to the guest, greeting them and showing them to the corner where they could leave their donated garments. Everybody was generous, bringing large boxes of clothes that probably were nothing for them, but treasures to the homeless.

The nobility had gone all out for the masquerade ball, their costumes inspired by fairy tales. Sleeping Beauty carried a tiny spinning wheel, Snow White had colored her lips bloodred and held a shiny apple, and Cinderella brought a handbag in the shape of a glass slipper. However, the woman who really drew my attention was wearing a red cloak above her white-and-red dress. Teresa was Red Riding Hood, and she had brought with her the big bad wolf. Who was underneath the costume I couldn't tell since the mask hid the person's whole face, and the shapeless clothing made it impossible to guess whether it was a tall woman or a short man.

At first, I wondered if one of Teresa's friends had dressed up as the big bad wolf, but I soon spotted her friends on the opposite side of the ballroom, keeping their distance from me and Teresa, as if we were infectious. I tried my best to find out who the big bad wolf was, but nobody knew, and the wolf was never alone for the first few hours, accompanying Teresa everywhere as she mingled. My chance came when the two left the ballroom to powder their noses.

Wanting Nolan to come with me as backup, I searched the room for him to find him in the middle of a dance with a noblewoman. A pang of jealousy spread in my chest, and I quickly shoved it away. I had no time for this. I had to find out who the wolf was.

Teresa slipped into the ladies' room and the wolf was about to do the same, but I grabbed the collar of its costume and demanded, "Who are you?"

"Let go off me!" the wolf hissed.

"Delilah?"

Several things happened in the next few seconds. Yellow flashed in front of my vision, my feet gave out, and I hit the floor hard. Then darkness engulfed me.

I came to myself slowly, a dull ache all over my body, as if I had bruised everywhere. When my eyes opened, I found myself bound in a stall, my mind fuzzy, my tongue as dry as sand. It took me a few minutes to put everything together. Delilah was the wolf, and she had knocked me out with the yellow liquid Manfred apparently handed out freely. How long had I been out? I didn't know, and it didn't matter. I had to get out of my bindings and expose Delilah before she killed another maiden. If she hadn't done so already.

I pulled hard against the rope, twisting my body as much as I could. The bindings were too tight. I needed something to cut them. But what? I didn't carry a knife on myself. My hair pins. I rubbed my bun against the wall until a pin fell out, picked it up, and worked on the rope. The process was slow and arduous, yet eventually, I managed to loosen he restraints and free myself.

I darted out of the ladies' room just as the clock struck two. I had been gone for nearly two hours! Nolan must have been out of his mind with worry, and the ball was about to end.

As I rushed into the ballroom, the first guests were leaving.

I was breathless when I reached him and uncaring that I was interrupting his conversation with a noblewoman. "Nolan, I need to talk to you now."

The confusion on his face turned to concern. "What are you doing here? You should be resting." At the shake of my head, he added, "One of the servers told me you twisted your ankle and had to lie down."

"Excuse me," I said to the noblewoman and signaled to Nolan to follow me as I scanned the room for the big bad wolf. "That's a lie. I was knocked out with magic."

"What? How? By whom?" His gaze trailed over me, searching for wounds.

"I'm fine. It was the big bad wolf. We need to get her."

The words were barely out of my mouth as I heard a familiar voice. "Good night and thank you so much for inviting us. You absolutely must try this chocolate praline, it's my mother's favorite."

Desiree. Delilah. Where had the voice come from? I whirled around just in time to see Greg put the proffered sweet in his mouth.

"No!" I rushed over to him. "Spit it out!"

“Why?” He only held half of the chocolate in his hand. He had swallowed the other half.

I ripped the praline from him and said, “It’s poisoned,” just as Nolan joined us, his eyes widening with shock.

His uncle coughed and convulsed, the green veins on his neck popping.

Nolan held him. “You must throw it up.”

“I can’t,” his uncle croaked.

Knowing I wouldn’t be able to help him or comfort Nolan, I ran out of the room, yelling, “Call the doctor!” I didn’t think a physician could help, but if I were fast enough, I could catch Delilah and force her to give Greg an antidote.

NOLAN

I stayed with Uncle until the doctor arrived. “My uncle was poisoned,” I said.

The doctor pressed the stethoscope to Uncle’s chest, then searched his medicine bag. I wanted to yell at him to hurry up, even as a part of me doubted that a regular antitoxin would help with dark magic.

“Do everything you can!” I told the doctor and whispered to my uncle, “Please hold on. I will find the cure.”

Uncle gave a weak nod, barely moving. My heart begged me to not leave his side, but my determination to help him propelled me out the door and after Jolie, who had run to confront Teresa and the wolf person. I hated that Jolie had gone alone and hoped I would catch up with her before anything bad happened to her.

Outside, I found Jolie dashing after a carriage that was quickly moving farther and farther away from her. On foot, she would never catch it, but my horse would do the trick. I grabbed my black stallion from the stable and jumped on him. Once I reached Jolie, I slowed down, took her hand, and pulled her up on the saddle behind me.

“Hold on tight,” I said, placing her arms around my torso.

“You should have stayed with your uncle,” she screamed to be heard over the wind.

“I couldn’t. Not when the wolf might have the antidote.”

“You storming out of there right after he collapsed is going to look awful.”

“I don’t care how it looks. I can deal with that. But he can’t die. I won’t let him die. I’ll get the antidote.”

Teresa’s carriage came into view. “What are you going to do?” Jolie asked.

“Force them to a halt.” I rode my stallion into the road, blocking the path of the carriage.

The coachman pulled hard on the reins, cussing me. “What are you doing? Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

“I need to speak to your employer.” I jumped off my horse, not offering to help Jolie dismount. I wanted her to stay behind where she was safe while I dealt with Teresa and her friend myself.

“Why did we stop? Who dares to cut off my path?” Teresa’s outraged voice streamed from the carriage.

I ripped open the door. “What have you done to my uncle?”

“Nolan? What are you talking about?” Teresa’s confusion transformed into a glare.

I pointed at the wolf. “Take off your mask.”

“Why? You can’t command her to do that,” Teresa said as her friend remained silent.

I reached out to remove the mask myself just as the wolf produced a yellow vial and threw its contents at me.

“Watch out!” Jolie tried to push me out of the way but wasn’t fast enough. The liquid tingled on my skin. My vision, my knees gave out, and then there was only darkness.

When I came to myself, the carriage and the girls were gone. Only Jolie lay on the ground next to me. “Are you hurt?” I pressed my fingers against her neck, feeling for a pulse, and her eyes fluttered open.

“Fine, just dizzy. Being knocked out twice in a day with dark magic is no joke.” It looked as if she wanted to say more, but her face contorted with pain, so I didn’t press her.

I swallowed hard, brutal acceptance settling into place. The wolf was targeting me, using dark magic against me and my family. I had failed to secure the antidote. Feeling like I carried a mountain on my shoulders, I trudged back to my estate.

“What are you doing?” Jolie asked, trailing behind me.

“Finding out if the doctor was able to do anything for my uncle.”

“Oh, Nolan,” Jolie said and squeezed my fingers. I turned around, enveloping her into an embrace. With her by my side, I could face whatever was awaiting me inside. However, not a second later, she stiffened and coughed violently.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, but we shouldn’t linger.”

I nodded, even though I wanted to stall. The longer I stayed outside, the longer I could hold on to the hope that Uncle Greg was all right, perhaps weak, but alive.

When the doctor greeted me with a head shake, the last remains of my hope shattered. Uncle was in his bed, his skin cold, his face drained of color. He wasn’t breathing. His heart wasn’t beating. A violent tremble seized my muscles as my chest contracted. I collapsed to my knees and tears ran down my face. My only family was gone.

“I will give you a moment,” Jolie said and slipped out of the room, not waiting for a response.

I was grateful for her offering me some privacy, yet also hurt that she didn’t try to console me. Didn’t she realize how much I needed her? I didn’t want to be alone! I wanted her to hold me tight and soothe me. Without my sunshine, I wouldn’t make it out of the dark abyss that surrounded me.

NOLAN

Wiping away my tears, I said, “I’m so sorry, Uncle. I wish I would have never come home. Maybe if I had stayed on my ship, this would have never happened. I feel awful that I couldn’t protect you. I should’ve been more vigilant. I should’ve known.” Sobs raked through my body. “And then I abandoned you in your last minutes of pain and fear.” Too distressed to continue forming words, I put my hands in a prayer position, tears cascading down my face. I remained like this for what felt like an eternity before I finally rose and headed to the kitchen where I found our gardener Tabetha.

“Lord Heinberg.” She curtsied deep, yet her head bow wasn’t quick enough to hide the terror written on her face. I would have to get used to being greeted with fear with the whole city blaming me for the maidens’ and my uncle’s deaths.

“I’m just getting coffee,” I said, trying and failing to put Tabetha at ease, who backed out of the room. Her leaving was fine by my me. I didn’t wish to talk to somebody who had already made up their mind about me. I was done bartering and being agreeable. It had gotten me nowhere. I was ready for a confrontation. Whether Teresa wanted to see me or not didn’t matter, I was going to talk to her and find out everything she knew about the wolf.

On my way out of the mansion, my attention caught on the open study. Inside, atop the coffee table lay a letter with a red seal—the seal of Snake Island. My heart raced as I tore open the envelope. I scanned the writing, then read it, then reread it.

Delilah had escaped Snake Island. The prison administrator reassured me that given the condition she had left in, sans money and food, she wouldn't get far and die soon from exhaustion or starvation, but I didn't believe that for a second. My sister was ingenious, and I was certain she had survived her escape, returned safely to Hamburg, and was now demolishing my city and me.

I stepped outside and screamed into the sky as loud as I could, "Delilah!" Even though I knew it was ridiculous, I turned around my axis, as if me yelling her name could force her to materialize. Delilah was nowhere to be seen, but I did catch Jolie's face in the top window before it disappeared behind the curtain. Why was she avoiding me? I shoved the thought away. It was too painful to examine. If Jolie abandoned me, then I had no one, and no purpose to stay in Hamburg. *Lies. You need to save Hamburg. You brought the curse on it, and you will be the one to break it.*

Driven by my inner voice, I hurried to the stables. One moment, I was saddling my horse, the next, I found myself outside Teresa's mansion, demanding to see her.

It was six in the morning, and at first, the butler refused to let me in, but conceded when I threatened to scream until I woke up the whole house. I waited in the foyer for a few minutes before Teresa descended the staircase in a rose morning robe. "What do you want?"

"Your wolf companion." I took a deep breath, trying to control the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

"Why are you so obsessed with her?" Teresa crossed her arms.

Was she serious? I wanted to shake her. "She poisoned my uncle, and then she knocked me out and Jolie with dark magic."

"She only did that to protect me from Jolie. As for your uncle, his heart must've given out or something like that. My companion had no business with him, she was paid to protect me from Jolie."

If the situation wouldn't have been so sad, I would've laughed. "To protect you? Why, because your servants weren't there to beat up Jolie?"

Teresa averted her gaze, and I wanted to demand an apology. But if I focused on what she had done to Jolie now, I might never find out where the wolf was. Teresa's attack on Jolie could be examined later, but the wolf needed to be stopped immediately.

"Your friend gave my uncle a chocolate, and second later, he was choking," I said, trying my best to keep my voice calm.

“Maybe he didn’t chew it properly.” My jaw twitched, and Teresa added, “Why would I want to hurt your uncle? We’re working together. We have a deal.”

I almost burst out that this hadn’t stopped her from instructing her servants to hurt Jolie but bit my tongue. If I pushed Teresa, her greediness and hurt pride could turn vindictive, something I couldn’t afford since I needed her help. “Tell me who your friend is.”

“She wants her identity to stay a secret.”

I ground my teeth. “Tell me who she is, or our deal is off.”

“Fine.” Teresa crossed her arms. “Her name is Desiree, and she works as a maid for Liam. I don’t know anything else.”

“Thank you,” I said tersely and exited. Outside, I pushed my horse into a gallop toward Liam’s estate.

Liam’s butler ushered me into the breakfast room. Liam barely looked up from his newspaper as I entered. Even though he didn’t invite me to, I sat down. Only then did he put away his paper. His face was gaunt, and his clothing hung limply off his frame. He didn’t say anything to me, simply stared at me.

“My uncle died last night,” I began, my Adam’s apple weighing one hundred pounds.

“He was a good man.” Liam’s brittle voice was that of a wizened man.

“I believe he was poisoned by the same person who has poisoned Marie.”

Liam’s face hardened. “Don’t you dare talk about Marie.”

Not wanting to get off on a tangent, I said, “I need to talk to your maid Desiree.”

Liam’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“Because she accompanied Teresa to my ball yesterday. Desiree was dressed as a wolf and gave my uncle a chocolate, which he ate right before dying. It was poisoned.”

Liam’s face turned expressionless once again, and he stared right through me. “Marie’s autopsy didn’t show any signs of poison.”

“Not the regular kind. We’re dealing with dark magic. Desiree used dark magic.”

Liam let out a laugh bordering on hysteria. “That’s farfetched even for you. Dark magic is hard to get. One needs to know where to go and have

the right payment. I doubt a maid has that much money or something else she can barter with."

I handed Liam the crumpled letter from Snake Island and waited as he read.

"Why are you showing me this?" he asked.

"I think Desiree is Delilah."

Liam shook his head. "Impossible." The tremor in his hand told me he wasn't fully convinced by his statement.

"Please, let me see Desiree."

Liam ran his hand through his limp hair that looked like it hadn't been washed in several days. "She quit two days ago."

I rose so quickly, my chair toppled backward. "And you didn't think that was suspicious?" When he didn't say anything, I added, "Where did she go?"

"I don't know. The housekeeper informed me of her leaving. She hasn't been working long for me, so I didn't consider her quitting a big loss, especially given everything that has happened recently." Tears swam in his eyes, breaking me.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, Liam. You looked so happy together. If I had known Delilah was planning something, I would've… I swear on—"

"On what?" Liam interrupted, almost screaming. "You can't swear on your family, and you can't swear on your honor. You might not have killed Marie physically, but your presence killed her. Face it, Nolan, you are cursed, and everyone who encounters you dies. Stop blaming your sister for everything and man up." He leaned forward. "Why don't you take me now too? I'm ready. I have nothing to live for."

"I'll find Delilah and bring her to justice." There was so much more I wanted to say to Liam, but I knew he wouldn't believe me until the curse was resolved. If I wanted any hope at regaining his friendship, I needed to prove Delilah was behind Marie's untimely death. Yet, even if I proved Delilah's guilt, it wouldn't bring Marie back, and I would have to always live knowing that innocent people died because my sister wanted to execute revenge on me.

JOLIE

There were two things I knew. Nolan had concluded that his sister was behind the murders. And Delilah had fled the city.

I wasn't too concerned about her disappearance. According to Manfred, she still had two more deaths left from the curse she had paid for, and I strongly doubted she would relinquish them or the opportunity to hurt and incriminate her brother further.

What I was worried about was the magic she possessed. I wasn't going to return to Manfred and make another deal. Once had been terrifying enough, and the price I had paid haunted me every time I was near Nolan.

But Delilah wouldn't have the same scruple. This was a woman who had killed her parents in cold blood, was destroying and framing her brother, and didn't care who had to die for her to achieve her goals. She would offer Manfred her soul if it meant obtaining more spells.

Given how effectively Delilah had knocked me out twice with the yellow liquid, I expected her to return with more of that spell. I needed to find a way to neutralize the liquid. I mulled over how I could do this with no magic of my own while I prepared the dinner tray. In no mood for company, I entered the study, hoping that Nolan had already retired to his chamber. Not only was he present, but judging by the look he gave me, he had been waiting for me.

"You're avoiding me," he said as a way of greeting.

A tremble started in my hands, and I put the tray down, wordlessly.

"Please sit." When I did, he pulled out a chainmail shirt with small lilac stones.

“What is this?” I asked.

“A precaution. I want you to wear it underneath the top layer of your clothes.”

“Delilah.” The word slipped out of my mouth, and a strange combination of devastation and excitement flashed in Nolan’s eyes.

“You knew my sister was behind all of this before I did. How? Why didn’t you tell me?”

I swallowed hard. “I can’t talk about this.”

He rested his head in his palms and let out a low sigh. “Please, if you know anything besides that she’s behind the murders, you have to tell me.”

I wanted to scream that Delilah had purchased a curse, and she was planning to execute two more murders. But I couldn’t do that. That would be a serious breach of my contract with Manfred. Even if I managed to press the words across my lips, I guessed that the repercussion from my transgression would be so bad, they would leave me helpless in bed for at least a day. Unable to risk that, I said, “I don’t know anything. I’m sorry.” At least the second sentence wasn’t a lie.

Nolan shook his head. “I don’t know what’s going on with you. You’ve changed, Jolie.” He took my hands. “I need you now more than ever.”

Pin pricks shot from my fingers up my arms and through my body. I pulled back, hoping the misery in my eyes made him realize the situation weighed just as heavy on me as it did on him. “It’s going to get better after Delilah is brought to justice.”

He nodded. “I hope so. I can’t stand the thought of losing you. We haven’t had much time to get to know each other in the traditional way, but what I feel for you, I know it’s real, I know it in my gut. You’re good for me. And I want to be good for you.”

I wished I could squeeze his hand, show or tell him somehow how much his words meant to me. Yet alone a brief touch was excruciating. Darn curse. Unable to maintain the contact any longer, I focused on the chainmail shirt. “So, this will stop Delilah’s potions?”

“I hope so. I didn’t have an opportunity to test it.” After a pause, he added, “The knockout spell Delilah used on us, she’ll be back with more.”

“Why did you weave the amethysts into the metal?”

“It’s a protection stone.” Nolan ran a hand through his hair. “A fortune teller told me it will protect me.” Nolan leaned forward, and even though he didn’t touch me, pain reverberated through me. My facial muscles

contorted, and I leaned back, hating the guilt and agony reflected in Nolan's eyes. He swallowed and composed himself. "The chainmail, I made it for the worst-case scenario. If I won't be around to…." He cleared his throat. "I want you to leave. You need to stay away from Delilah."

"What? No, I want to help."

He shook his head. "It's too dangerous. One of my ships is coming tomorrow, and I've already arranged with the crew for you to depart with them on their next journey."

"You can't just ship me off." I jumped up and Nolan rose too. This time it wasn't the curse, but my own will that made me step away from him.

"I'm not getting rid of you," he said gently. "It's just for ten days. When you come back, everything will be resolved."

"Or I might return to you dead or in prison." I crossed my arms. "I'm not going anywhere."

Nolan's face hardened. "I'm not losing you. I've lost too many people already."

"I understand. Me too. That's why I don't want you to take on Delilah by yourself."

"You don't have to worry about me. I can do this."

"But I can't? Why? Because you're a man and I'm a woman? You might have more physical strength, but I have a higher chance of figuring out how Delilah thinks and what she's planning next."

He turned away from me and paced the length of the room a few times. "You're not going to give up on this, are you?"

"No. I'm staying here, and I'm going to help you." I walked to the door. "Goodnight. I'll see you tomorrow." I exited, not giving him the chance to argue with me further.

NOLAN

The carriage's door opened, and Jolie stepped inside. "I'm ready," she said.

She looked gorgeous in the cobalt-blue coat I had bought for her to replace the one I was now certain Delilah had shredded. Jolie's voluminous, raven hair shined brightly, creating a stark contrast to her porcelain skin and her hazel eyes, which sparked like gemstones. My stomach clenched as I thought about what I had to do. I knew she would view it as a betrayal and not me protecting her. I felt awful, tricking her like this, but it was for the best. Her safety came before her stubbornness. But right now, I didn't want to think about it. Right now, I wanted to enjoy what was potentially our last day together. Because while I had every intention of defeating Delilah, nothing was guaranteed in a battle. I might have determination, but my sister was driven by an endless well of hate and had black magic on her side.

"Are you wearing your amethyst protection?" I asked.

Jolie undid the top button of her coat to show me the top of her chainmail. "Are you?"

I nodded and glanced away. Everything inside of me screamed to press her into me, but she had reacted so strange to any touch recently that I didn't dare. Being so close to her and not touching her was pure agony. To distract myself, I stared out of the carriage's window and counted the trees and clouds we passed.

"It's beautiful," Jolie said, awe in her voice as we reached the Advent Market. It had taken me quite some time to convince her to take the carriage

instead of walking by foot. My argument that we should preserve our energy for Delilah had finally won her over. In truth, I wanted to make a statement, let everyone in Hamburg know about my feelings and intentions toward Jolie. I was done hiding who I was. Life was too short to pretend to be somebody I was not or to conform to other's standards.

Together, we stepped out of the carriage and into the church square that was decked out with rows upon rows of stalls. Merchandisers showed off their wares, which included toys and accessories, such as scarves, hats, and gloves. The food section, particularly the sweets, made me nauseous. My hands itched to upturn the crates and destroy all the goods, and I had to remind myself that Delilah didn't plan to annihilate the whole town but poison a few well-chosen people to cause me the most pain and ensure I was imprisoned when she was done playing with me.

As we walked, Jolie kept a respectful distance between us, probably not wanting to rush me going public with her. I, however, was ready. I didn't care what other's thought or said. Let them talk. I took her hand and guided her to the beginning of the Christmas Market.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"Showing everybody that the rumors that I'm sneaking around with you are untrue. I want everyone to know that I'm going to treat you with the respect you deserve and that I expect them to do the same."

Color crept into her cheeks, and a tiny smile bloomed on her lips before she suppressed it. "I don't think now is the time to draw additional attention."

"Why?" I challenged. "Delilah will only show herself when she can strike again. The Christmas Market is the perfect outlet for her to pick her next victim."

Jolie's face paled, and I wondered whether she thought I was using her as bait. I would never do that, but I was afraid that telling her so would make her suspicious about my plans. So instead, I said, "Delilah won't attack you. You're safe. I'm certain she will go for somebody from the nobility."

Jolie gave a weak nod.

"Let's see if there's anything worth buying," I said, trying to distract her.

As we walked from stall to stall, I clenched alternately the mirror I had put in my pocket and the dagger in my holster. Jolie too had both items on

her. I hoped she wouldn't have to use either. The idea was to get her to the harbor before Delilah showed up. A part of me wanted to enjoy these last moments with Jolie while another part of me wanted to hurry her through the market. Not wanting Jolie to get suspicious, I tried to relax, telling myself that Delilah would strike once night time rolled around and not in bright daylight.

Everything inside of me tensed as I saw Teresa with her friends gossiping at a stall diagonal from us. They threw their heads back laughing, and I ground my teeth. How could they be so joyful at a time like this? Didn't Teresa realize the danger around us? Didn't she care that Greg, Marie, and Nadine were dead?

The longer I watched Teresa, the more it felt like my insides were boiling. Tearing my gaze away from her, I focused on the painted, wooden jewelry boxes in front of me and attempted to calm down. Everyone dealt with tragedy in their own way. Perhaps Teresa's way was to distract herself. Perhaps deep inside she felt just as miserable as I, even though I seriously doubted that.

I turned my attention back to Jolie, who had moved on to the next stall, admiring a pair of gloves with golden embroidery.

"A gorgeous pair of gloves for a gorgeous lady," the salesperson said. Jolie smiled politely but didn't reply. With a wistful glance, she moved on.

"How much?" I asked.

Jolie's head whipped around. "You don't have to. This is not necessary."

"I want to." While she protested, I paid for the gloves and handed them to her. "Please accept this gift."

She smiled. "Thank you. They're beautiful."

She looked so happy and carefree in that moment, I wanted nothing more than to pull her into my arms and kiss her, but even I wasn't that daring. I wasn't worried what Hamburg would think about me kissing my maid, but I was worried how it would look for me to kiss a girl only a few days after burying my uncle. If Uncle Greg were here, he would urge me to pursue my happiness, which I planned to do. The only positive that came from Delilah targeting me was the realization that life was too short, and I couldn't squander it. Still, my dear uncle deserved a few months of mourning. Also, my relationship with Jolie would benefit from a slower pace after everything we've been through and what lay still ahead of us.

A scream roared through the air, shattering the dreamy Christmas Market atmosphere. “Help!”

I whirled around, trying to figure out who was on the ground. All around me, people were whispering and exchanging nervous glances, but no one dared to do something. Everyone was frozen by fear. A second scream rang out, and I realized it was coming from aside alley. I hurried toward it, noticing that Teresa was gone. Jolie’s feet pounded behind me. I hated dragging her into this, but I had no time to argue with her. Too many people had died already. I was not going to let Teresa down as well. Despite everything she had done, she didn’t deserve to die.

I darted into the alley and stopped in my tracks. Knowing Delilah was behind all of this was different from seeing her. My sister had escaped Snake Island. My sister had gone to extreme lengths to hurt me and Hamburg. Now, one of Delilah’s arms was around Teresa’s neck, the other pressed a dagger to her chest. Teresa must have passed out from panic, because her eyes were closed and her body didn’t move.

“Brother, finally, we meet again.” Delilah gave me a full smile as the wind blew her blonde curls back, revealing her round face. “I knew it would be hard to get Teresa to drink, especially in your presence after your little visit to her home the other day,” Delilah mused, as if talking about the weather. “At first, I worried that making her die in your arms was impossible.” Delilah titled her head, looking deranged, “But then I realized, I didn’t need to poison her in public. You know why?”

My body clenched as I realized that Teresa wasn’t just still, her chest was no longer rising and falling. “Did you kill her? Is she dead?”

Delilah ignored my question. “Since the police can’t detect magic, they ruled all deaths so far as unfortunate, inexplicable incidents. I thought this time, I would spice it up for them. That’s why I stole your dagger.”

I reached for my holster, and my shoulders dropped with relief as I touched the cool hilt of my blade. “You’re lying!”

Delilah let out a high-pitched laugh and showed me the hilt engraved with the initials NH. Then she raised the blade.

“No!”

“Oh, yes!” Delilah plunged the blade into Teresa’s stomach. Blood burst out, soaking Teresa’s brown cloak. Delilah let go of Teresa, who dropped to the floor with a gut-wrenching thud.

Delilah and I started running at the same time.

“Take care of Teresa,” I yelled to Jolie and raced after my sister, gaining speed on her quickly. However, when I grabbed her hood, she spun around and threw a yellow liquid at me. My instinct was to duck, but I forced myself to remain standing. I needed to test the amethyst chainmail shirt. Most of the liquid hit my torso, but two drops landed on my cheek. Immediately, my vision blurred, my muscles trembled, and my limbs faltered. I was on all fours, my palms pressed hard into the cold cobblestone as Delilah disappeared behind the street corner. The amethyst had worked. I hadn’t passed out, I had merely been weakened, yet, it had been enough for my sister to flee. It was terrifying how only a few drops of the liquid were enough to temporarily steal my strength. It took me a few minutes until I was able to stand and make my way back to Jolie and Teresa, Delilah long gone by now. I reached the woman at the same time as the police did. Even though Jolie was the one holding Teresa, the police grabbed me. My hands were placed behind my back and icy cuffs were snapped around my wrists.

“Lord Nolan Heinberg, you’re under arrest for the murder of Lady Teresa Daviau,” the police officer proclaimed.

I didn’t respond while Jolie screamed at the top of her lungs, “He didn’t do it! You got the wrong person! It was his sister! She used magic poison to kill Teresa and then framed Nolan by stealing his sword. Can’t you see? Teresa was dead before she was stabbed!”

“Step aside, miss,” was all the police officers replied.

“I’ll be fine,” I said as I was carted off into the police wagon. I knew no such thing, but in that moment, I wasn’t in the least concerned about myself. What worried me was that I hadn’t managed to put Jolie on the ship and ensure she was far away and safe from Delilah.

JOLIE

I couldn't believe this was happening. The police couldn't arrest Nolan. How could they not see that he had been set up? How could they be so blind to all the injustice he had suffered?

When it became clear the police were deaf to my protests, I rushed back into the hustle and bustle of the market, begging anyone who would listen to help. But while a few people gave me sympathetic glances, most of them seemed to be satisfied with the police taking Nolan away.

The nobility wasn't going to aid me. They were too scared by the tragedy that had befallen Hamburg. They wanted a solution to their problem, even if it was the wrong one. They didn't care if an innocent man went to jail as long as the murders stopped.

Even though I knew Paul wasn't the biggest supporter of Nolan's, I still found myself rushing to his tailoring store only to be told that he had left to see his sister. Good, I could talk to Paul and Tabetha at the same time.

"Excuse me, Miss? Are you Jolie?" a middle-age sailor asked me.

I nodded.

"The ship is about to leave. Please follow me."

"What?"

"Lord Heinberg was supposed to bring you onto the ship. Since he didn't show, I decided to find you myself. I was told you were at the market."

"I'm not going anywhere." I crossed my arms, furious at Nolan trying to send me against my will. "I need to stay here."

"Miss." The Sailor touched my shoulder.

“Get your hand off me, or I’m going to call the police.”

My words had their intended effect because he immediately took a step back. “It’s for your own good.”

“I’ll make sure to tell Nolan you tried your best.” Without another glance backward, I hurried toward the mansion. The carriage would have been quicker, but I wasn’t sure if I could ride in it by myself without Nolan, and anyhow, my legs itched to be used.

I found Tabetha and Paul in the garden. They were locked in an intense conversation, their postures humming with tension.

“Nolan has been arrested for Teresa’s murder,” I burst out, joining them. “He didn’t do it. Delilah is behind it.”

“What?” Paul and Tabetha stared at me, as if I had lost my mind.

“She escaped the prison in Snake Island and returned here to exact revenge on Nolan for turning her in. She has been using dark magic to poison Nadine, Marie, Greg, and finally, Teresa today.”

Paul grimaced. “That’s why you were asking about black magic. This is a very elaborate story that Nolan told you. I understand you’re in love, Jolie. But have you lost your mind completely? Nolan is behind the deaths. He made up this story to cover his behind.”

I shook my head. “No.” The hardness in Paul’s eyes told me I wouldn’t be able to convince him, so it turned to Tabetha. “You don’t think that Nolan is behind this, do you? You know how much he loved his uncle. He would have never murdered him!”

Doubt flickered across her face. “Perhaps he didn’t intent to kill his uncle. Perhaps his uncle was an unfortunate accident.”

“Greg died after eating the chocolate the wolf had given him,” I protested.

“Really? A chocolate?” Paul clucked his tongue. “You need to start using your head, Jolie. Tabetha is leaving. She will stay with me until she finds another job. I highly recommend you do the same. Move out of this doomed house.”

“Yes, doomed, that’s exactly—” My voice broke off as an overwhelming pain crashed into my skull. I had been so excited and driven by adrenaline that I had ignored the warning signs of my binding agreement with Manfred. Now, I was paying the price.

“Are you all right?” Tabetha pressed her hand against my forehead. “You’re burning up.”

I stepped back. Since there was no way to convince her to help me, I needed to get rid of her, so that I could come up with a plan to free Nolan. “I’ll be fine. It’s just a headache.”

I headed toward the house, and Tabetha called after me, “Please quit, Jolie. It’s not safe for any of us here.”

I didn’t reply; instead, I dragged myself into the study and collapsed onto the divan, the pain in my skull too excruciating for me to haul myself up the stairs.

Nobody would care I was in the study. The house was deadly quiet, making me assume the rest of the staff, just like Tabetha, had abandoned their employer in his hour of need, all falsely believing he was a murderer.

Despite my worries, my sleep-deprived and pain-crippled body won out over my mind, and I fell asleep. My dreams were restless. I was running through a dark house, blades and sizzling potions coming at me from all sides, threatening to shred me into tiny pieces and burn my skin. Each time I thought I was about to reach the exit, the house grew, and the door moved farther away from me. I woke up with my heart racing, and my temples throbbing, certain my nightmare had roused me. However, footsteps in the corridor alerted me to the real cause of me being awake. I was no longer alone and judging by the light clicking of heels, I was certain a female had entered the mansion.

“Tabetha,” I whispered, knowing she didn’t wear shoes with even the tiniest heels, and yet, still hoping it was her.

Since I hadn’t properly closed the door to the study, I carefully pushed it open, wincing as it creaked.

“Here she is. The final girl.” Delilah gave me a deranged smile, her face creepily illuminated by the wall chandeliers. “Victim number seven. A bit anticlimactic to save the maid for last, but my brother never had good taste.” She shrugged casually, as if all of this was just a game.

My mind froze, but my instinct took over. I dashed out of the study, down the corridor, and upstairs. Too far away from the exit, the second floor seemed like the safest option.

“I’m going to catch you,” Delilah sing-songed. “But don’t worry. You don’t think I’m going to finish you off with Nolan in prison, do you? Where would be the fun in that? No, I’ll let you lovebirds have a final reunion. After all, he needs to see that he can’t do anything to save you, and

Hamburg needs their final proof that Nolan Bluebeard is a vicious maiden killer. So deranged that he even murdered the one he claimed to love."

While she spoke, I reached Nolan's wing and locked every door behind me until I found myself in his bedroom. Did he keep daggers or other weapons here? I sure hoped so. I still wore the amethyst chainmail shirt and carried the dagger he had given me but having additional weapons would make me feel much better.

"Foolish girl." Delilah's voice boomed through the walls. "Do you really think that a lock will stop me?"

A click and then the sound of the first door flying open. Clearly, Delilah had no problem breaking a lock. I rushed to shove as much as I could in front of Nolan's bedroom door. First, I pushed the clothes chest across the floor, groaning as I wondered whether Nolan kept bricks in it. Next came the cabinet, the bedside table, and all the chairs in the room. By the time I was done, my arm muscles trembled with exhaustion and sweat ran down my body. I didn't have time to catch my breath before the door rattled, and the lock turned from the outside.

I stiffened, praying Delilah didn't have a potion to blast away the furniture. After several minutes of the door shaking but not budging, my shoulders sagged with relief.

"Smart girl. I'll give you that. Too bad we're on opposite sides. I could use a servant like you."

"I would never help you, no matter what you promise me."

Delilah cackled. "Everyone has a price, even those uninterested in money. What if I promise to make you the most famous pianist in Hamburg?"

A resolute no sprang to my lips, but I clamped a hand over my mouth. My refusal would only further enrage Delilah. If I played nice and managed to fool her, she might let her guard down, making her easier to defeat. Also, I needed to keep her talking while I came up with a plan. "How would you do that?" I asked with a note of interest in my voice, knowing I needed to be believable and couldn't overplay the part.

Delilah let out another ghastly laugh. "I escaped prison, came here with nothing, cursed my brother, and put him into prison, and you wonder how I would make you a pianist?"

"I don't see how being a pianist is connected to your other accomplishments." Bile rose in my throat at the fake compliment.

She sighed. “I have magic. After I’m done with my dear brother, I’ll regain my money and status. Each alone could make you the most in-demand pianist in Hamburg. Since I have all three, your wish is guaranteed. The real question is what makes you more useful to me alive than dead?” Silence spread between us, and I wondered whether she was testing me to see how serious my commitment was.

“Easy,” I said, injecting my voice with a confidence I didn’t feel. “Killing me in front of Nolan would devastate him. But it is nothing compared to me switching sides and betraying him. Losing me physically would throw him into a depression he wouldn’t be able to recover from. Losing me emotionally would make him deranged. He wouldn’t be able to trust anyone else ever again.”

“Very nice,” Delilah said. Even though I couldn’t see her, I imagined saliva pooling in her mouth and her nostrils flaring with excitement like that of a wild beast before it devoured a gazelle. “There’s just one problem. I don’t trust you. You need to prove yourself.”

DELILAH

"How?" Jolie asked.

I smiled, having hoped that that would be her response. Either way, I planned to kill her, but why not have a little bit of fun first? Jolie might think she was playing me by agreeing to betray Nolan, but she was a fool if she thought she was going to double-cross me. I would make her pay dearly for thinking she could outsmart me.

First, I would make her stab Nolan in the back. Seeing the hurt in my brother's face would be worth taking the additional risks that came with pretending to trust Jolie. Once he was locked up, Jolie would die knowing she had caused him pain that had crippled him, and my brother would stay in his misery for decades, suffering, paying every day for what he had done to me.

I schooled my face into a neutral expression, not wanting her to hear the glee in my voice. If she backed out of this, it would be so much less fun. "First, you need to show that you're no longer afraid of me and come out of the room."

Her response was a prolonged silence and then, "How do I know you won't kill me?"

Was she trying to negotiate with me? Didn't she understand that I had all the power here? "If I had wanted to kill you, I could have done so long ago."

She responded with more stubborn silence. The dense servant was really grating on my nerves. Time to teach her a lesson. I lit a match and transferred the fire to a cloth and pressed it to the bottom of the door. I

wrapped my scarf around my nose and mouth to protect myself from inhaling the smoke, stepped back, and waited. It only took a few minutes until the furniture scratched across the parquet floor behind the wall.

Smart girl. Jumping out of the window would only break her legs.

When the door sprang open, determination shone on Jolie's face. She trampled out the fire, then focused on me, a dagger clasped in one of her hands while her other hand was hidden in the folds of her dress, probably holding another weapon.

Silly girl. Did she really think I would attack her when she was fully prepared and not in the least emotionally upset? Where was the fun in that? No, I would strike when she was the least prepared. I extinguished the remains of the fire. To demonstrate my trust in her, I turned my back and started down the staircase. Jolie stabbing me in the back wasn't a concern. Because as much as girls like Jolie enjoyed fighting for the ones they cared about, they weren't smart enough to jump at an opportunity. All they were capable of was defending themselves and maybe killing someone in the heat of the moment, only to be consumed with regret for the rest of their lives. Even if Jolie dared to strike out, I knew I could stop her before her blade reached me.

As I had predicted, we reached downstairs without any incidents, and a tingle of disappointment went through me, everything within me itching for a fight. Oh well, I would get my kicks soon enough.

"Wait for me in the study. I have a surprise for you," I said.

Jolie stared at me like a terrified deer. I swiveled on my heels, confident she wouldn't run. She wanted to protect Nolan, which in her mind meant finding a way to disarm me and then hand me over to the police. Foolishly, she had decided to gain my trust, something that would never happen. I had never been a very trusting person, and after Nolan had turned me in, I had sworn to never ever trust anyone again.

Outside, I opened the doors of the carriage that had delivered me here. "Get out." I pressed my blades against the throats of my two captives. They mumbled protests through their gags but followed me, smart enough not to kick me. With their hands bound behind their backs, I wasn't concerned they might get their filthy hands on my weapons.

All color drained from Jolie's face as she saw my captives. "Paul. Tabetha," she whispered, a tremor in her voice.

“I picked up two of your friends on my way here. I figured they might come in handy. Since I’m a generous person, I’ll give you a choice who you want to kill.” I pressed my blade hard enough against Tabetha’s neck to pierce her skin. A few droplets of blood dripped down her dress. “Her or him.” I nicked Paul’s as well.

Jolie stood completely frozen. She didn’t seem to blink or breathe.

“Which one will it be? I don’t have all day.” I hardened my voice.

“You can’t… I can’t…”

“Yes, I can. And, yes, you will. Because if you don’t choose one, I’m going to kill both. And then I’m going to kill you in front of Nolan.”

I saw the wheels spinning in Jolie’s mind but wasn’t concerned. There wasn’t anything she could do besides obey me, and soon, she would come to the same conclusion.

She lifted her chin defiantly. “If you kill them now, Nolan will have an alibi. You won’t be able to pin their murders on him.”

I chuckled. That was her great loophole? Was she jesting? “Not all bodies have to be found. I can hack them both into pieces and make them disappear in the Elbe River.”

Her face paled, and a smile tugged on my lip corners, sweet victory warming my insides. That’s right little maid, you are no match for me.

“Let Tabetha go,” she said, and I was almost proud of her for keeping her voice so steady.

I tilted my head, considering. In any other circumstance it would have been fun to do the opposite, but I wanted Jolie to know that she and only she was responsible for Paul’s death. She had chosen him to be her sacrificial lamb to rescue Nolan. “One young man for another young man. A fair trade.” I gave Paul a hard shove, and he stumbled toward Jolie.

She grabbed his shoulders and turned him around so that his back was facing her. “I won’t do anything until you let Tabetha go.”

“What’s my guarantee that you’ll go through with the murder?”

“We both know that if I won’t, you will,” Jolie replied haughtily. “But if I kill Paul, I have no guarantee that you will let Tabetha go.”

My jaw tensed. I didn’t like it one bit that Jolie was trying to dictate the rules. I would make her pay for this too. Removing my blade from Tabetha’s neck, I said to her in a dramatic voice, “You’re free to go. Looks like you’re the lucky one.” She wouldn’t get far. As soon as Paul was down, I would end Tabetha with my throwing knives. I was an excellent shot.

However, things didn't work out the way I had expected them to. Tabetha didn't run outside the study but toward Paul, who pushed her aside and jumped me, his hands no longer bound, but holding a blade. Darn maid must've cut through his restraints while she was talking.

As I met Paul's dagger with mine, I swore to give Jolie as much pain as possible. How dare she interfere with my plans again and again? Within a few moves, I forced Paul from the offensive into the defensive. I disarmed him with easy and plunged my dagger deep into his heart. While I had been dealing with him, Jolie had climbed out of the window and was trying to get Tabetha to do the same, saying, "We need to run. We can't win against her."

I removed two throwing knives from my holster—one for Jolie and one for Tabetha. I sought to kill Tabetha and injure Jolie. However, only Tabetha's blade met its mark. She collapsed to the ground, and I pulled another knife to attack Jolie only to discover she had vanished into the forest. A string of cusses fell from my lips. I couldn't let her escape. She'd notify the police and mess everything up. Worse, she might free Nolan from prison and take him to another city, and then he would never pay for his sins.

I needed to go after her. About to do so, I stopped when the main door opened with a bang.

"Jolie," my brother's concerned voice called out. "Jolie, are you here?"

I uncorked the transformation bottle Manfred had given me, threw Jolie's hair in it, and gulped it down. With or without Jolie, the time for my grand finale had arrived.

NOLAN

"Nolan? Thank God! How did you get out of prison?" Jolie rushed toward me, peppering me with questions. I was so relieved to see her, I could barely process what she was saying. All I wanted to do was press her against me and hold her tight.

After a long hug, I explained, "Liam helped me. He paid the prison guard a hefty sum to take a break."

Jolie's forehead wrinkled. "Why did he do that?"

"He realized that I was innocent and had been set up. He said it didn't make sense for me to kill Teresa in the middle of the Christmas Market when I had so many better chances to get rid of her before that." I exhaled. "But enough about that. What matters is that you are fine. We need to leave. My sister will come for you. We need to get you somewhere safe, and then I'll wait for her here to turn her in."

"But the police have no reason to believe your sister is behind the murders," Jolie stated, studying me in a strange way I found unnerving.

"I'll find a way to make them believe me."

"How?"

I didn't have an answer for her, so I improvised. "Perhaps I can convince Manfred to testify for me. I'm happy to give him all my money, if it means getting justice. I can always make more money, but the families of Delilah's victims deserve closure and I want peace."

"Manfred isn't interested in money," Jolie said sharply.

"How do you know that?" Why was she acting so strange?

For a second, she looked taken aback, but then she said calmly, “He deals with black magic. Those people are into dangerous stuff. They can get money easily.”

I sighed. She was right of course. And then a new idea came to me. “Liam.”

Jolie’s hand flinched in mine, and she took a step back, probably thinking me insane.

“I know it doesn’t look good that he helped me escape, but his word holds power. Five years ago, he helped me turn Delilah in, and now, his wife is dead. Delilah definitely had a motive.”

Jolie nodded. “Indeed, but are you sure that will be enough?”

I gazed into her hazel eyes, trying to figure out whether it was enough. Jolie had always been the one telling me that things would work out. It was my turn to be strong and reassure her. “Yes, it will be in the beginning, and we’ll figure out the rest as we go along.”

The door behind me creaked open slowly, and I whirled around, shielding Jolie with my body. Then I must have lost my mind because in front of me stood Jolie.

“Nolan! You broke out! How did you do it?” She glanced past me, and her face hardened. “Get away from her.” Behind me, Jolie took a step to the side and whispered, “Oh, no! She must’ve taken a transformation potion to look like me.”

The Jolie by the door was advancing rapidly toward us. “Get away from her! She’s Delilah.”

“That’s not true,” the Jolie behind me said. “She’s a liar.”

“No, she’s a liar.”

Not knowing whom to believe—both women were nothing like the introspective and quiet Jolie I had first met—I took a step away from the first Jolie and drew two daggers. “Both of you stay away from me.” I needed to keep them at a distance as I processed what was happening here. One of the women was Delilah. She wanted to hurt both the real Jolie and me. And she would, if I picked the wrong girl.

Both Jolies tried to get my attention by repeating and swearing they were the real one. I blended them out while trying to figure out whether it was more likely that the real Jolie had been in the house or that she had come for the door just now. The former one, I decided, and yet, I wanted to give second Jolie a chance.

“How did you get here?” I asked her. If she said she had run from the city here, I would know she was lying since I had come down the path myself less than ten minutes ago and would’ve seen her on the road.

“I escaped through the study window from her.” She pointed at the first Jolie. “I was running through the forest,” she faltered, “but then I heard a horse neighing, and I was certain you had returned. I hurried back as fast as I could.”

I believed her, and yet, I couldn’t notice how awfully convenient her story was. I turned to the first Jolie. “What do you have to say to that?”

Her lip trembled. Whether it was genuine or an act, I didn’t know. The real Jolie had changed so much since I had met her, I couldn’t tell anymore what was out of character for her. “She’s a liar. She made this story up. After your arrest, I tried to get help, make other people see you were innocent. When no one believed me, I came back here to think and come up with a plan.”

“That’s a lie!” Jolie two screamed. “That’s what I did. Not she.”

I pinched the space between my brows, not knowing whom to believe. They both acted strange. I needed to come up with a question that only Jolie or Delilah could answer.

Even if Delilah knew the answer, chances were high she would manage to bite her tongue and not reveal her true self. Thus, it made more sense to ask a question only Jolie knew the answer to. But was there such a thing? I could have asked Jolie something we had discussed in private, but what was my guarantee that Delilah hadn’t been spying on us through conventional or magical means? If she was able to kill people with spells, why shouldn’t she have a spell to overhear conversations? It seemed that a question wouldn’t do, but I knew something that would. “Let’s go to the ballroom,” I said. “Both of you will walk in front of me and keep a lot of space between yourselves.”

The Jolies gave me puzzled looks and then exchanged hostile glances before heading down the corridor. My two swords remained drawn as I followed them, prepared to intercede if one attacked the other or me. Once inside the room, both girls went to the piano, but neither of them sat down in front of it.

I pointed to Jolie one. “Play something for me.” Both my sister and Jolie knew how to play the piano, but I was certain that even if they chose to play the same melody, it would sound different.

Still, disappointment bubbled up in me when Jolie one played “Für Elise” by Beethoven. I didn’t know whether she was Jolie or Delilah, but I was certain that now the second Jolie would play the same piece.

“Für Elise” had been published recently. If someone had asked me a week ago, I would have said that there was no way Delilah could’ve learned to play it. But my sister had surprised me again and again. After everything she had pulled off, what stopped her from being able to play a piano piece, without any practice?

Although Jolie one didn’t hit any wrong notes, the music sounded dissonant. That didn’t necessarily mean she was Delilah, it could have been that she was simply nervous. “Thank you,” I interrupted, not wanting her to finish. I motioned to Jolie two. “Please play something for me.”

To my astonishment, she didn’t play Beethoven or any other composer I was familiar with. The melody that sprang from her fingers was unknown to me but that didn’t detract from the deep sadness of the piece peppered with tiny hope. My body relaxed, and I lowered my blades. Only a few notes, and I knew without a doubt she was my Jolie.

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who had come to that realization.

“Bad choice, brother. Once again, you have to ruin everything.”

I whirled on Jolie one, on Delilah, and my sister smiled wickedly as she threw two daggers. One penetrated the side of my stomach deeply, the other embedded itself into my right forearm, making me release my blade. As it cluttered to the ground, I stumbled backward, trying to avoid a third weapon flying toward me.

“Nolan, no!” Jolie drew her dagger and lunged at Delilah, who must’ve run out of knives because she threw a yellow bottle at Jolie. Instinct took over, and I jumped in front of Jolie, shielding her. The liquid hit my amethyst chainmail and yet I could barely stand, my body throbbing with agony. I needed to remove the daggers before I lost too much blood.

JOLIE

Nolan was on the ground, bleeding out. I had to defeat Delilah quickly and tend to his wound. I advanced with my dagger as Delilah produced a glass vial, a half inch of it filled with tarlike liquid.

"Time to finalize the curse." She gave a haughty smile as I realized with horror that she was holding the poison that had killed six people so far.

"If you don't want to be responsible for Nolan bleeding out, you'll drink this." She handed me the flask, confident she had won the battle.

I took the vial, my mind whirring to figure out a way to use it against Delilah. Needing to buy time, I kept Delilah talking. "I thought you didn't want Nolan to die. I thought you wanted to turn him in."

Delilah's eyes narrowed. "That was my original plan. But if he goes to prison, there's always a chance he'll escape. Turns out, I like the finality of death after all."

"But if he's dead the city won't have someone to blame for the tragedies."

Delilah crossed her arms. "They can still blame him when he's in his grave."

"While you reclaim your title and be friends with the same people you hurt."

She cackled. "It's only fair. They never helped me when I was a child, or when Nolan turned me in. My actions have made us even."

A chill seized me at how cavalier she was. "What about Tabetha and Paul?"

“I never intended to waste the spell on such unworthy people. With dear brother arriving so soon after their deaths, I won’t have to go through the trouble of disposing of their bodies. It’s all very convenient.” She smiled viciously. “I’ll simply add them to the list of his victims, saying they found out who Nolan truly was, and he had to silence them forever.”

“I see. And what makes you think, that I will just drink this poison? You’re going to kill Nolan either way, I might as well save myself.” I needed to bait her, provoke an emotional reaction that would distract her.

She snorted. “You might be smart and resourceful for a maid, but you have a huge weakness. Your compassion. Your love.” She pointed at her brother. “For him. Your life would’ve turned out very differently if you hadn’t gotten involved with him.”

While she talked, a plan formulated in my mind. There was only one way to defeat Delilah without implicating Nolan or myself. It was now or never. I had one shot to get it right. I set the bottle down on the piano and said, “I won’t let you make him watch me die.” I dashed toward Nolan, picked up his sword, and brought it down in a way that appeared, as if I was about to end his life.

“No!” Delilah crashed into me, and sword flew out of my hands and skidded far away from us. As I had predicted correctly, being in charge and executing her plan took precedence over her own safety.

I kicked Delilah hard in her stomach. Once, twice, three times. Then I got on top of her and pinned her with my legs. I grabbed her shoulders and pulled them upward only to slam her skull into the ground. Her eyes crossed from the impact, and I grabbed the flask and held her mouth open as I poured the filthy liquid down her throat.

Her eyes went wide. “What have you done? You can’t do that. It’s my curse.”

“And it will end you as it should.”

She convulsed. Her arms and legs lashed out at me, her nails dug into my skin. Soon her movements grew weaker and weaker and ceased eventually. Foam streamed out of the corners of her lips and her eyes turned glassy. Her breathing stopped and so did her pulse.

At first, I didn’t feel anything. It was only when I was certain she wouldn’t move that tears streamed down my cheeks, and my hands trembled.

My peripheral vision filled with red, jerking me into action. I had to help Nolan. I rushed over to him, tore off a piece of my sleeve, and bandaged his wound. “It’s going to be all right. I’m here.” I kissed him and then rose to notify the police, praying they would conclude that Delilah, not Nolan, had terrorized Hamburg.

JOLIE

FOUR MONTHS LATER

In just a few short months so much had changed. It had taken the police about two weeks after Delilah's death to wrap up their investigation and declare Nolan innocent. Liam and Manfred's testimonies had played a big part. Liam had finally concluded that Nolan was innocent, and Manfred had said something about restoring balance for his reason to testify.

But even with Nolan officially declared innocent, it had taken the rest of Hamburg several months to warm up to him.

Nolan and I spent this time strengthening our relationship and sharing every part of ourselves with one another. We grieved over Uncle Greg's loss, Nolan opened up to me about his childhood, and I came clean about seeking Manfred's help and what it had cost me.

The last three months had brought us together closer than ever and when Nolan asked me to marry him, I said yes. With everything that had transpired, we decided to marry in secret. We didn't want anything to darken our wedding. We didn't need to hear whispers about the murders, Delilah, or how inappropriate it was for a count to marry an aspiring pianist maid. Thus, we agreed to exchange our vows on the eve before we took Nolan's ship on our honeymoon cruise to Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. We had picked Scandinavia for our honeymoon in honor of Uncle Greg and his wish to see those countries.

The day of our departure, I was performing a final check on the estate before slipping into my wedding gown when I found a new letter addressed to Lady Heinberg in the study.

I paused, unsure whether to open it. I wasn't yet legally married to Nolan, but rumors of our romantic relationship have spread through the newspapers, several of them outraged that a count was not only courting a maid, but that he also allowed and encouraged her to play the piano professionally. It was unheard of for the wife of a nobleman to work.

Deciding the letter couldn't be for anyone but myself, I tore open the envelope.

Dear Lady Heinberg,

I read your story in the paper and wanted to thank you. You're an inspiration, one that comes at a time I desperately need it. You breaking the Bluebeard Curse and bringing justice to Hamburg makes me hope that not all is lost with my brother Hansel. It fills me with sadness to read about the lengths a sister could go to destroy her brother when I would give anything to recover mine. It's been a week since I lost him. And while that might sound not like much time, and everyone keeps reassuring me that he will return on his own, I know I have to take matters into my own hands. I have hesitated until now, thinking that one girl like me couldn't do much, but your tale showed me how wrong I was. Thank you for giving me hope.

Sincerely,

Gretel

My hands trembled as I flipped the envelope to find an address. There was none, and thus, no way for me to respond to Gretel. My gut instinct told me she was from the region around the Black Forest. The region that I had to cross next time I would visit my parents, the region that was rumored to belong to a wicked witch with a beautiful face. I swallowed hard as I remembered the svelte blonde in a crimson cloak exiting Manfred's abode. She had fit the description of the witch that was rumored to rule the territory. I needed to ask Manfred about her. And then what? Without a return address, there was no way for me to find Gretel and relay the information I had gathered. I chewed the inside of my cheek, trying to find a way how to help Gretel. *You already did,* my inner voice whispered. *You've given her courage and hope. You're not meant to solve everyone's problems.*

I chewed on my lip, unsure whether that was correct.

The clock above the mantelpiece chimed one, two, three, four, five, six times. In an hour, I would be married. This was the time to focus on Nolan

and myself and the happy ending we had worked for so hard. This was the time to enjoy the present, not worry about the future.

I closed my eyes and said a quick prayer for Gretel, asking that she was reunited with her brother and that if she needed me, she wrote to me again, providing me with more information so I could aid her. Then I hurried to my room, hummingbirds fluttering in my stomach.

"You are gorgeous," Nolan said an hour later, taking my hand.

I smiled. "You're dashing yourself." His dark-blue suit complimented my long-sleeved silver dress; both were unconventional wedding dress attire choices and suited our unconventional love story.

Holding hands, we walked to the altar. My shoes clacked in the empty church, which was lit with long candles and filled with an earthy and piney scent of myrrh and frankincense.

The priest gave us an approving nod. "We have gathered here today to unite Nolan and Jolie in marriage. Remember as you say your vows that these are not just words, but represent the commitment you make to be present with each other in your marriage for all the days and all the years you will be together."

Nolan pulled out a beautiful emerald ring that sat on a golden band. "I, Nolan, take you, Jolie, to be none other than yourself. I promise to stand by your side, to encourage you, be open and honest with you. To laugh with you and cry with you. To always love and honor you, both freed and bound by our love, for as long as we both shall live." He slid the ring on my finger, and a tear of joy ran down my cheek.

I produced a golden band. "I, Jolie, take you, Nolan, to be none other than yourself. I promise to stand by your side, to encourage you, be open and honest with you. To laugh with you and cry with you. To always love and honor you, both freed and bound by our love, for as long as we both shall live."

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," the priest said. "You may kiss the bride."

Nolan's lips pressed against mine, sending fireworks through me. Our life together had begun.

THE END

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed taking this journey with Jolie and Nolan and watch them move from hopelessness and darkness into the light and toward joy.

I had first read the original Bluebeard fairy tale as a child and immediately was fascinated with it. The tale was very dark with Bluebeard executing his wives for their curiosity, which I guess back then wasn't considered a virtue. As you can see, I put a very different spin on the original fairy tale. What can I say, I'm a hopeless optimist and romantic and enjoy showing how a person can find the light and unconditional love even if he/she had a rough start in life. I truly believe that it's not where we come from, but where we choose to go that defines us.

I hope you enjoyed reading The Bluebeard Curse as much as I enjoyed writing it.

The Hansel and Gretel Curse, the third book in the Curse Fairy Tale series will be released in mid-January 2019. You can **preorder it here.**

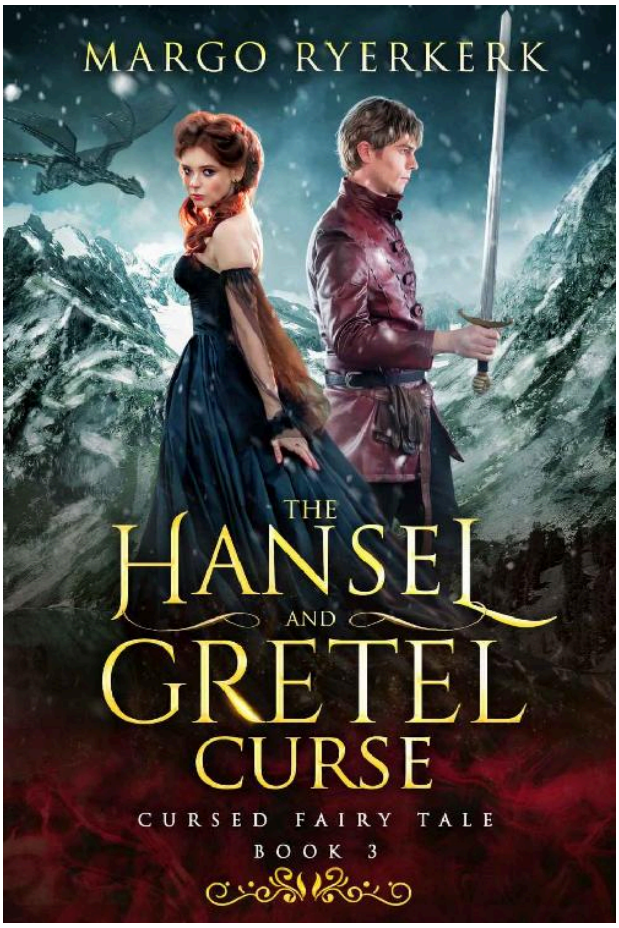
As always, I couldn't resist making changes. You won't find an evil stepmother that sends her children hungry into the forest. However, you will meet dragons!

I wish you all a wonderful and peaceful festive season.

Talk soon,

Margo Ryerkerk

PS: Feeling generous? Reviews are the best presents you can give an author!



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margo Ryerkerk is the author of The Cursed Fairy Tale series and The Ardere Series, a YA paranormal series about magic, love, coming of age, and friendships. After completing a BS in Psychology, a MS in Marketing, and a two-years stint in the fashion world, she became a full-time author and can't believe she gets to spend her days creating stories. When she's not writing, she loves to read, travel, and dance to pop anthems.

Raised in Austria, Margo now lives in the USA with her husband and her Pomeranian.

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